

TONGUES OF MEN AND OF ANGELS

by

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ABSTRACT

Tongues of Men and of Angels is a collection of short works exploring E.L. Doctorow's claim that, "There is no longer any such thing as fiction or nonfiction; there's only narrative." Though the individual pieces in *Tongues* might be conventionally categorized as short memoirs and personal essays (and thus thought of as works generated by a singular author about the life of that author as a singular person), the book as a whole seeks to problematize popular notions of writing about the self. By subverting formal elements held to be the foundations of personal nonfiction narrative, these pieces, each in their own way, question the prevalent opinion that a given narrative is capable of posing as strictly fiction or nonfiction.

Written as present-tense memoirs, my collection's opening pieces, "Mother Moves Us, Father" and "College, Art, Et al: An Evolution," highlight the slippery ground between the self recounted and the self *in the act* of recounting. The narrator of "Mother Moves Us, Father" attempts to investigate the meaning behind a memory of his adolescence and, in the process of elucidating this memory, loses track of his original intent in a spin of florid language, strange characterizations, and interpolated stories. Conversely, the narrator of "College, Art, Et al: An Evolution" holds tight to his narrative trajectory but, in doing so, exposes the artifice and absurdity of trapping one's personal history in the guise of linear recollection.

The pieces "What's He Got?" "Thriftstore," "Paralyzed by the Immediate," and

“Cut but not Dried,” interrogate the convention of first-person POV as crucial to nonfiction or realistic narrators. On the other hand, works such as “Pornography,” “Loop,” and “Tongues of Men and of Angels,” perform an overwrought first-person narrative. These greedy, interruptive, lyrical, and tangential voices blur the tentative lines meant to distinguish story and storyteller, experience and authority, and the subject and its traces.

Freud famously said, “Writing is the record of an absent person,” and, years later, Leonard Michaels expounded upon this idea in “Writing About Myself,” arguing that author-personalized narratives bring subjective notions of presence and absence into extreme tension. Just the basic awareness of this tension, Michaels continued, allows the writer, when writing about himself, to place more interest on “the expressive value of form and its relation to the personal more than [an interest in] particular revelations of [one’s] individual life.”

Hoping to expose this writerly tension for the reader while also seeking a sense of ineffable (in)completion, *Tongues of Men and of Angels* assembles a multivalent, polyphonic narrator who, through gaps, tangents, liminal spaces, and “fictional” elements, is more human and more real than any conventional subject of nonfictional writing might hope to be: a narrator who lets the reader listen, as Barry Hannah puts it, “to the orchestra of living.”

For Michelle

I write out of a greed for lives and language. A need to listen to the orchestra of living. It is often said that a writer is more alive than his peers. But I believe he might also be a sort of narcoleptic who requires constant waking up by his own imaginative work. He is closer to sleep and dream, and his memory is more haunted, thus more precise.

I write to live and I write to share. The Original Creator's version seems random and fascistic, but there are enough consistencies, if you wait and watch for them, to give remarkable tales. You must wake up terribly to catch them, even though what you produce may be close to dreams.

—Barry Hannah, *Why I Write*

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- "Mother Moves Us, Father" in *Nashville Review*
- "College, Art, Et al: An Evolution" in *Denver Quarterly*
- "Paralyzed by the Immediate" in the *Blue Earth Review*
- "On Your Guard" in *McNeese Review*
- "Thriftstore" in *Dark Sky Magazine* and *Barrellhouse*
- "Loops" in *Oregon Quarterly*
- "A Weaker Sun" in *Boulder Planet*
- "What's He Got" in *Storyglossia*
- "Murfreesboro" in *Stumble Magazine*

MOTHER MOVES US, FATHER

Mother moves us. It's 1987. Because of the Alps, she moves us. Because of Sister Maria. Because western Colorado might as well be Austria. Sees herself in Sister Maria, Mother does. Or *as* Sister Maria. That's it, but ten or twenty times better than any Julie Andrews floosy. Mother aloft in alpine meadows. Up there and cloudside, just blissed out of her material mainframe. Never you mind the steep scramble or the sweat pouring forth. Never you mind those baking UVs and imminent lightning danger. In some simple frock and frolicking, and Mother's only forty. Still the hottest Evangelical in Kansas City. Hair fixed or not. Body as God's wondrous temple. Body still springy as her mini exercise trampoline. Though be assured that worldly beauty means nothing to this Sister Maria. In her daydreams she's decked out in earth-salt shoes, has no need for make-up. In her daydreams she's merrily crushing pastel tufts of tundra, turning girlish circles as her guitar plays itself. And you can bet she's belting along—*O the hills are alive with the sound of music!* Sings and sings, Mother does. Voice aloose with unbridled truth, and so it echoes the whole earth. Notes bouncing craggy peaks, vast glaciers, maybe triggering an avalanche, maybe eradicating a sinful ski village in one hellish scoop. But Mother doesn't see, can't. Not this close to her beloved Savior. Not high on these rocks and cast in His singular gaze.

Then, after the romp, traipsing home. Which surely means Over the River and Through the Woods. Surely, because Mother adores all things mountains, but even more

so all things holiday and winter. All things Christmas and Eve, evergreens and log cabins and Good King Wenceslas' footprints sharp in moonlit snowpack. Oh, see that? There they go! Leading, leading—like a January blue jay's friendly call. From deep in the firs he beckons, and Mother follows so unafraid. Batting branches, holly berries in her tresses, and then here's a clearing. Right up to our new little cabin, she prances. Jack Frost windows backlit flickering firelight. For this is the place promised. Her family's cozy refuge, some white-pillowed Canaan. Everyone safe inside and waiting for her to burst through the door. "Mom's back! Mom's back! Praise the Lord for her finest mothering skills and the unparalleled job she does preparing us for Eternal Glory!"

Like the Ingalls, this vision. How always in the end, despite close-calls aplenty, the whole family's secure. Because Mother believes in *The Little House on The Prairie*. The books, not the TV show. She won't own a TV, won't let us. Because she doesn't believe in TV, and that's how she knows we can make it in the Big Woods. How Ma and Pa done had. Struck out on their owns come hell or high water, come a-grumblin' or a-gigglin', but they done had. Though goaded by myriad tribulations. By wolf and panther. Despite, the Ingalls flourished, and notwithstanding that bittersweet sting of butchering one's own pet, or the devotion it takes to gnaw sustenance off the cold bone. Gruesome and true events as this, but the family fused, fused fast, fused righteously.

So Mother moves us and I'm thirteen. Meaning Jessica's fifteen. Jessica's fifteen going on twenty-six—the brink: *eager young lads, roués and cads*, etc., etc.

Mother moves us because the land of milk and honey can't last forever. Expiration, armies of ants. In other words, my sister and I have used Father's tools to

mount locks inside our bedroom doors. It's Jessica's brainstorm. Me, I'm a toady, total devotee. Fed from underground streams with notions of feministic privacy, Jessica is. Clan of her own cave bear. See, the girl's gone and developed early. Yet another reason Mother believes we must flee. For in the momentum of mere weeks at a secular high school my sister's sprouted D-cups. D for decadence. D for defamation. D for demons of lust in the shadows of ample cleavage. Then, along with her smaller, blander bras, Jessica's abandoned her Amy Grant LPs. Left the albums—thank Jehovah, only the albums, not the bitsy-boulder-holders—at my bedroom doorstep. The firstborn son, his bed suddenly aglow with Amy's heavenly smile, with a blossomed understanding of the worth of door locks. Imagination developing spread-legged. The virtue of a lip-glossed smile on a bobbling lap. And all the while, outside our split-level, horns honk.

The horns are boys. Deer to a salt lick, these worldly suitors. Instinctually, they've gravitated to the spruced-out bosom. Suddenly Jessica boasts four expectant paramours: two with facial hair, one named Piggy, and one who wears white trench coats with the cleverest leather ties. These throbbing semi-men bestow warped and pirated mixed-tapes. Cassettes of Cinderella, Bangles, Bon Jovi's inexorable *Slippery When Wet*. That androgynous Jersey rocker and his perfectly sculpted buttocks breach our Jericho Walls. Slick riffs soon oozing pollution out from under Jessica's door. It suffocates our Godly home, sets our little sister, just four years old, mumbling oddities in her sleep. "Halfway there, halfway there. Living in a wheelchair..."

Herein Mother, as we say, falls Out of the Spirit. "I failed raising you!" she howls into the oak trees. "Tie a millstone about my neck!" she wails, but I ask, "Hey, what's a

millstone again?” I say, “Is it one of those giant ancient rock coins that had to be rolled around?”

“No!” Piggy yells, cupping his hand, calling from out on the sidewalk. “No, that’s a Rai stone, man! A Micronesian currency, circa 500 AD. Those were limestone! Your mom’s referencing a stone—that may have been limestone but was probably sandstone—used for grinding grain. Of course, you want to drown someone, a Rai stone will work just as well, given the depth of the water, given the weight of the perpetrator—”

“Shut up, Piggy!” Jessica yells. “Go home! You give love a bad name!” and this works for Piggy, but not for Mother. Mother continues to wail. Mother continues to disdainfully chide herself, to denigrate her parenting skills. Or until we agree to pack our things. But still she grounds us, sends us to our rooms. Still she makes certain our doors remain ajar, that Amy, God’s greatest siren, stays safely stowed below my stiff-sheeted trundle bed.

I’m making light. I’m coloring backwards. The move was certainly more than all this. More than Milton’s platitudinal silver-lining undermined by standard and ribald pubescence. For there were signs far beyond our immediate family. For one, how the congregation of Full Faith, our Evangelical hearth and headquarters, had swelled into the tens of thousands. Had lost its intimacy. Was ducking its original mission. The battle diluted, lost, a forgone conclusion. Kansas City’s most virtuous community of believers all but blue-faced and farm-buying. The Midwest had finally succumbed to New Age armies of the Antichrist, our very own neighborhood rife with Buddhist temples, yoga studios, Asian restaurants. Practically Sodom publically fellating Gomorrah on the

Heartland's front lawn. Soon it was obvious that no amount of picketing Fox Hill Abortion Clinic or disseminating tracts to the turd-burglars at the Liberty Memorial could turn these rapacious tides. When, at local convenience stores, we'd inform merchants that they'd lose our patronage, that we'd take our gas-pumping elsewhere should they not remove their *Hustlers* and Marlboro displays, we were met with glares, common scoffs.

Mother takes my hand, storms us from these stores. 1987. Autumn of God's Earth. Almost 1990. Almost the New Millennium. Hear Patmos' hot Apocalypse in the very warble of Reagan's loose-skin throat: "Mr. Gorbachev, open this gate! Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall!" Such apathy and pluralism. And this from our Commander and Chief. Such nasty globalization the Gipper forecasts. Mother says, "Son, remember, 'Without a vision, the people perish.'"

That's Psalms, maybe Proverbs, but our family's vision is clear: Jesus calling us forth into the wilderness, into the recesses of Colorado. Gunnison, population 4,000. No interstate. No way in or out of the place but via treacherous mountain passes. And how could such a lost watering-hole not be peopled with staunch Puritans? Folks who run smut vendors out of town and summon manna swarms at the first hint of a beef market crash? Once settled in Gunnison, Mother will homeschool our little sister in peace. Havilah won't know what degradation city-life holds, what myriad cultural masochisms she's missing. Concealed in the Rockies, Havilah will, not unlike her *Fiddler on the Roof* namesake, wear floor-length dresses and learn to bake wholesome breads and mend her own clothing and, under quaking aspens, weft knit her afternoons away. We all can, will, and should. Our return to Eden where we'll wait demurely. As virgin brides doped on so

much thin oxygen. Our souls spread wide as pagan thighs. Come, you lascivious Lion of Judah, come, Lord Jesus, and ravage our hallowed hymens.

So Mother moves us for all these things. Or such were the reasons she gave. Gave *then*. What she didn't tell us has since boiled out and down. Or up. That maybe we moved because these notions burned not in her gut, but in her mind. That maybe we moved only because of Father. Because he *had* to go, and maybe Mother only later endorsed it, only later created her own motivations? Did Mother truly and desperately love Father? Or was it just that she needed Father like she needed anybody, anything, to save her from the Big Bad, the New Age Nazis, the Principalities of Darkness? Did not Maria need the Captain? Did not Liesl need Rolf? The *whom* as *that*. That which whisks us into a state so noisy with hypothetical happiness, with future adulation, we can no longer hear the whispers of self-loathing.

But this much is fact, in that I can remember it: Father was losing his mind. Father had to escape. Had to, because his body was eating itself. Had to, because he was still young, so much younger than Mother, and his favorite story was Jack London's "To Build a Fire." You know the tale. Or some version. Say *The Empire Strikes Back*. On the icy planet of Hoth where Luke and Han snuggle-up in a steamy *tauntaun* carcass—"I thought they smelled bad... on the outside"—and await rescue. Oh, but London's story never reaches this point of grace. His is the fiction of a man and Husky lost in the Yukon. Caught in an eternal-dusk of arctic winter, slugging high snow and sub-zero temperatures, they're desperate to reach an outpost. The man won't admit it, but he's

clueless as to their direction. He's discombobulated and wholly due to outrageous pride. An old timer had warned him not to travel alone in the Alaskan winter, but our protagonist brushed aside the advice. Now, cold creeping in, he's forced to stop, to build a fire.

He does. Flames roar. Good. As he quickly warms himself, ego floods back. Thinking he's right as rain, he foolishly continues on. The dog, however, doesn't wish to. It understands something the man can't. So the man forces the dog. Onward, onward. But soon enough, the man, tool that he is, stumbles through the ice of a hidden stream. The dog doesn't. The dog only watches. Bone-soaked and brain-benumbed, another fire must be built. And so the man does, but under a tree. Big mistake, monstrous. It's all about setting, see. Heat loosens snow from the branches, snow drops. Snow suffocates the fragile flames and, warmthless, the man will surely de cease.

Chattering uncontrollably. Muscles stiffening. In a final attempt, he tries luring the dog close. Wants to slice its belly. Wants to heat his hands, buy some time. He coos, *Here, boy. Come here, buddy...* But never before has he bestowed such sweetness on the creature. There's more than distrust in the animal's eyes. Steely irony, say, and the dog won't budge. Won't so much as lick its frosty buttohole. Alas, wistfully, cathartically, belatedly, the man must acknowledge his own ignorance and die, and this was the story. Father's favorite.

But I never read it, only listened to Father's take. How the dog simply moves on from the plank-bodied man. No big deal, just find another guy's fire. Yes, I only listened, but I was a fine and calculating listener. Aware how, in the story, Father and I were the

dog, never the man. Oh but did we ever know the man. He was the quintessential Midwesterner, our very neighbors, the men in our church, the dads of my friends. Complacent and fat and out-of-touch-with-nature. Men who lived solely for evening yard work and crisp hedges. Who slaved for clean driveways and drove sleek sedans while decked in designer shirts. Men gulping gravy and slamming domestic beers, so much of their days wasted arguing Chiefs and Royals, Iran and Contras, ranting and hollering because they'd given up, could only live vicariously, only live in suburbia.

Suburbia, that extravagance-demanding façade. Ah, but not in the mountains. No, Father assured me, there was zero room for profligacy in the mountains. That's right, and even less for pretense. Only necessity, see. In the mountains, Father said, a man was judged by his endurance and sensibility. By his ability to balance autonomy and the unforgiving natural elements against the love of a devoted, purpose-driven family—*this Family*.

Father's rallying cry. *This Family!* This Family is moving to the mountains and, once there, nothing can cleave us. Not fashion, not puberty, not the sagging-gut of secularism. This Family will hunt, will fish, will chainsaw its own pine cords. This family will never remove the chains from the tires of its rusty pickup. Hiking vast ridges of sage, of juniper scrub, unbounded by citified notions of time. This Family will finally have a lifetime to bond. To joke and laugh and boost their immune systems. And no longer will Father be trapped in some windowless department store pharmacy. No more dolling out suppositories to the iniquitous, to the torpid, for he'll have his own pharmacy in the mountains. A Mom-'n'-Pop shop, complete with soda fountain, herbal supplements, the latest issue of *Mother Earth News*. No longer will customers seek Father's advice on

merely the flesh, but rather beg his take on the philosophical, the ecumenical, yes, *this Family*.

This Family in Gunnison. And in Gunnison, Father tells Jessica, when you're living at nearly 8,000 feet, when you're wrung by cragged peaks with the scent of burning wood threading the very fibers of your clothes, well, Honey, high school girls could care less about shopping. That's right, they could care less about make-up or Aqua Net, because, see, you don't need hairspray to figure skate. Nope, walk around in the winter, walk with sculpted bangs and hoop earrings, walk even a single block without a pragmatic hat, and you'll lose those lobes to frostbite. Mountain girls, Father announces, have never heard of Guess! Jeans or Benetton Rugbys. For they're all rodeo queens and ski racers, women of action, not leisure. "I'm telling you, Jess-A-Kerr-Kerr," Father booms, "you'll lose that weight in a snap!"

My sister doesn't answer. She glowers across the moving boxes, our bare living room. Eyes wet, she lifts a single finger, points to the script on her neon pink visor.

GAG ME WITH A SPOON.

I nod, but I don't get it, not yet. Not until after the move. And Father ignores her. Father asks me, "Then how about you, Slick?" He says, "You gonna sissify with your sis or get ready to be a real frontiersman? Out there in God's country? Do some deer hunting? Procure your own snowshoes? Bring home pounds and pounds of venison? Can't you just smell it? The girls roasting our meat as we drowse by the stove? How's that sound? Come here, come on in here."

And I do. I step over to him, to Mother, to Little Sister. Jessica shakes her head. She blinks outside at our moving truck, the boys and their horns silenced, Piggy never

saying goodbye. Father, Mother, Havilah, their hands flutter all over me, flutter around my neck and down over the white felt lettering of my favorite t-shirt, the t-shirt Jessica gave me for my thirtieth birthday. TOTALLY AWESOME, it reads, but I do not point at it. No. Though would I now, I wonder, if given a second chance? Would I, had I not lost it in the move?

COLLEGE, ART, ET AL: AN EVOLUTION

i.

Undergrad. I'm propagating myself the oil painter. Chalking up yawning nights in the school's studio. Slow-smoking only local weed and keeping my linseed in runny excess. This so my lush pigments are ever-drooling loose, crisp lines. That's how I must roll. Every image hyperbolized. André Breton's madness infusing my knuckles. Or so I tell myself. That I've got the coolest and stiffest precision. But in the end it's always the same: mimetic boobies gone non sequitur.

Yes, seems the only depth of my curiously misdeeded dream is a slick niche of nipples. Nipples and nipples and nipples galore. Teats in celestial orbit. Udders ripening on the chests of bananas. Mammilla bio-evoluting from the foreheads of sea-elephants forever awash in crying seas...

O Jebus Kite but I'm tremendous! Watch me stretch my own canvases with a beer in one claw and these eyes gorgeously bloodshot, these nails tainted yellow, this hair a perfect cake of five Damar varnishes. At least until my beloved professor—you guessed it, middle of class—levels that pewter cane at my easel and barks, "You there! You gonna move to Paris? Gonna ménage the Éluards? Your paintings, Christ, they treat you like their godforsaken whore. When you gonna let your work destroy itself?"

How to explain the fulcrum this man commanded in my mind? How his hoary goatee, decades beyond the Beats, still stabbed like an icicle of godfrost at those stuffy

squares and bourgeois button-downs? Yet he continues his yollar, cane unwavering: “Hell, if you had any sense, Kiddo, you’d drag big red Xs through every one of your weird, little wart thingies. Utter chaos, and *then* see what you think you control!”

Liver spots pulsing, the man returns to his stool in his corner by the stereo. Jerking Brubeck to full clamor, he falls into that famous half sleep. But worse, for the hour’s remainder, my classmates, this hoard of talent-void and futureless ghosts, all of them, to their acrylic-slathering last, wander over to pat my arm, to whisper, *Don’t take it personally—the guy probably hasn’t seen a tit in years.*

“Like, so, maybe I won’t? And so maybe he hasn’t? I could give two shits...”

But my wolf-glare wobbles. Worst painter ever, this old coot prof. His Jane Frank pastel rip-offs, nothing but slop bucket slabs in the school library and cafeteria, in the goddamn student baboonion. Stupid stool. Stupid cane. Stupid goatee and jazz piano. Brubeck! Like *exactly*, those stale pings same as this asshole’s stale ideas. So breathe, you tell yourself, breathe like the master you are and just feel all that antiquated shit roll off your beautiful mallard back.

Cool droplets. Drip, drip, drip. And that’s a wrap—one goodbye stroke to this final areola.

ii.

Next, well gentle thespians take me in. Warm welcomes with pallid arms wide and lickity split I’m big method man on campus. But in my mind it’s still a one-man show. Just me and this Nicky-Cage-shaped shadow. We’re trapped in Lynch’s lens, our snake-skin jackets, our hearts wild and hotter than Georgia asphalt. It won’t take long, I

tell myself, moving from stage to screen, so until that moment, why not? Beckett, Pinter, Kushner—*dozen gad damn madder*.

No, because what I'm acting is irrelevant. Because I'm gobbling mushrooms preshow and insisting I do my own make-up, flare my own wardrobes. Naturally, word spreads. Soon I'm packing the minitheater every run. It's my meaty diatribes. How I rip giggles from the first two rows every last time, you badass, you Leg-breaker. It's how I have all my characters, indiscriminate of age or authorial intention, ranting, eye-rolling, spewing mouthfuls of sexy spit. Though after speckling my fans for a solid month, I come to the career conclusion: I'll never again bow at Curtain Call.

Nope. Instead I clomp off. Off stage, chest out, down center aisle sashaying creaking motorcycle boots and swishingly tight corduroys. Like, Eat my greasepaint, fanatics. Like, Watch me attend every cast party with red-carpet fervor. In dim, sticky-floored kitchens, in hazy laundry rooms, I'm regaling leagues of freshmen girls with languid past-life yarns, with proof after proof that I'm certainly the Lizard King reincarnated, reimagined, reinvigorated, and ready to rumble.

Though these bouts of self-praise prove exhausting. They require sabbaticals. Posing by a fridge, a foosball table, Southern Comfort got by the clammy neck. I find peripheral and dark windows for working on gaunting my stances, on raw-boning my features. Inevitably, though, some Betty pinpoints a failing, internally crushes me. *Well your hair, see, is only dark brown, so, no, I wouldn't really call it Haunting Raven Onyx.*

iii.

Back at home ASAP, double-dyeing, and in the mirror it occurs to me to perforate my ears. Five times myself, and that would be, well, something. Then, one week later, amidst my inaugural attempt at snorting Ritalin, so giddy am I with the lobal amendments that I procure a Latin tramp-stamp tattoo. Slope still slipping, I take a crack at home-piercing the old navel. This being, I tell myself, a necessary rounding-out of my androgyny. I'll straddle worlds, I will, glue so many ideological binaries shut.

Chief Two-Spirit, I'm thinking, and the safety-pin jerks, pops, grimaces closed.

Day Two, I can't bend over.

Day Three, I'm oozing a broccoli-flavored sauce.

Day Four, my slam-poet girlfriend tells me I'm sleeping in my talk. But so what?

Post a petite hospital stint, to bolster esteem, I simply purchase a handsome blue *motocyclette*. Throttling harder and harder, I lurch about this teensy town. Shirtless, weeks wobble by. The minitheater's thinning, my fan-base faltering, but it's by no fault of my own. Albee, Stoppard, Havel. I'll tell you why, because nobody's nobody but Ionesco. He and me, we're anguishing our dreams together in the bitter isolation of genius. Of course we are, so I'm convinced it is he, the spirit of my Romanian devil, who lodges the providential hag in my path that day.

iv.

A woman. She's sopped in the crotch. Outside a pawnshop, she's asking if I'll buy a mold-swollen copy of John Waters' *Shock Value*, only \$2.99. I produce exact change. I find the nearest bench. I finger it open and above me clouds crack apart. A

cartoon hand of the Almighty reaches down, pats my newest Caesar cut, and I skip rehearsal. Because I'm convinced I must memorize the book's first chapter. Soon my stage manager stops calling. Soon I come to the twitchy conclusion that, Well, Jesus Christ, all of this world, hell, I mean, it's pretty much very similar to a stage, no?

Virtuosity, that. But more importantly what Waters is preaching: vomit *is* absolutely no different than a standing ovation. Which means, deductively, that ovation is no different than ovulation, that a fan-base can be conceived no matter the time or space—

I'm back in motion. I'm motoring city parks, screaming monologues at pedestrians. Loved or flipped-off, I'm noticed, needed. Until I begin to realize such witnessing is free for them, fine, but not for me. No, I require a good deal of gas money. So I seek employment. Though I've got no prior experience, my roommate finagles for me a dishwashing job. I'm ardently grateful for the modesty of my position, I am. So I retain it for a solid month. Then I take a hard look at my hands. Disaster. Palms insipid, raisined, it's clear The System is undermining my vigor. I decide to sell pot.

Sell it, sell much, but never well. Case-in-point, the unfamiliar high-schooler. Cursed with the hugest of lips and barely a nose upon which perch Coke-bottle glasses, he's on my porch with a bouquet of cash. I crane up and down the street, drag him in. Narc? He claims no, claims we have untold mutual acquaintances. He recites names. I ask, "What *is* a name?" as I direct him to my low basement. Here abides a five-foot bong named after my mother. We smoke Terri until the boy pounds his thighs and cries out for fresh air. I tell him more. He cries out for the football star he'll never be. More. For the brow-shape he shares with Jeffery Dahmer. More. For two imbeciles found dead in a

random basement....

His tears, they've provoked mine. By the shoulders, I lead him upwards, to the living room, to the sofa. Opening a night-breeze window, I bring him blankets, heat soup. We watch *Cheers* reruns and laugh in brave harmony. I say, "Goodnight, Sweaty Prince," but in the morning he's still there. This seems a distinct betrayal. I sit on his feet, wallop his knees. I call him pussy-ass and ass-pussy, and my heart is doing that thing, that beating, too heavy. Can you blame me? I'm hearing only distant sirens, feeling my wrists clamped behind my back, flat on my spine, knees wide and kissing the spiderwoman.

v.

Aside from that, admittedly, these dealing months remain mostly blurry. Though I do recall they coincided with my jerking off for heavy girls. Here's really the action I think this entire story's yearning for. I'd maneuver friendships is how I'd play it. Make the offer when the gals were drunk, stoned, emotion-vexed with menstruation or half-asleep in the crannies of duplexes. No touching me, only watching. The delicate dropping of my drawers. The boinging loose of my curved virility.

I weighed mostly 135. This bare bulk felt not so much powerful as eternal. My first time on display was for a thirty-year-old, my landlord. All 200 pounds of her ogling my middle and flames of incredible concentration rising in her sumptuous cheeks. That was the hook that barbed me. That, and afterwards how she said thank you, showed me to the door, so systematic, so perfect.

Anyway, a pragmatism of Platonic eroticism wormed in my blood, got cozy. All told, I had a cycle of eight. Two chemistry majors and a Safeway deli girl were next.

Then, way, way down the list, heady with emboldenment, I even tried my neighbor. A pear-shaped Korean, she, and seemingly bit-champing, but even as I unzipped, what's this? She's immediately stripping. And masturbating in kind. Her sounds are hospital sounds. From her vents a wrong scent of masala. Then the breasts, freed beasts, massively sagged and brutally lopsided. The appendages sport nipples far too real, so detailed and aggressively salacious that in their stead I can see only red Xs...

Cane limped in my fist, I'm thinking, What's wrong with this one? Why can't she understand the situation? What's lost in translation that makes her not even remotely curious about the business of my hand and manhood?

Jezebel on a jetplane! Now she's spreading *Playgirl* magazines all about our periphery. Now I am measured, excessively reflected. I'm crying, *Hey, Where did these come from? Did you have that much audacity, really, just walking into convenience stores and making your prurient demands?*

vi.

That same week I moved to another rental, moved in a stewed stupor. Though I retained the belief that the idea of intimacy could be negotiated. And I fostered my faith. Got back on the wacking horse. Again and again, until my hope rang louder and louder, an ever-expanding galaxy of casino slots. Its call was all I could hear.

Even after I sold my motobike. Even after transitioning from actor to gonzo journalist. Even after my girlfriend—you'll recall, slam poetess—canned me because she'd heard rumors of effeminism. Speaking of, the ex had a chubby best friend. This girl's eye sockets were filled with acne and she wore only pastel Gap outfits, but for

some reason she tailed us every date. Yes, you'd think I would've propositioned her for a lap glance, but no. I never crossed that bridge. Though there's this arc to my tale:

A month after the break-up, I'm in my red velvet bedroom. Christmas Break. I'm curled in my bed, and I detect an extra body. Or extra extra body. There's already a girl sleeping beside me, this being my environmentalist opium-dealer. Despite the dark, I know her snore, her old-cider breath. For two days we've been gulping, inhaling, glossing, fondling. We've been breaking into white-brick apartment buildings for muscle-relaxers and benzos and packets of Taco Bell sauce. So feeling this third body, I conclude it's only my bladder pressing. Fearing I'll douse us both, I stumble to the john, urinate. As a caution, clunk to my knees for a brief bile expulsion. Story shortened, I don't make it back to bed. Keel over. Beside the dank toilet, fading to and fro from consciousness. Multiple moons moving across multiple windows. Ragged clouds and furnaces clicking. Then, at some arbitrary point, this chubby best friend's hovering. She's flipping me on my back. Gruffly log-rolled, I am. Gruffer still, she astrides me. The rest, it's mechanical. At best. Yanking low my boxers. Rubbing me with drool-filled palms. A floodlight on her chest. I remember all this, but her face remains a messy shadow. When she's wheedled half a hard-on, she mounts.

It hurts, despite the haze, hurts big.

The bending, the rough flopping free, the forcing back in. She has me by the wrists, arms in evangelical worships, keeps trying to make my numb fingers kink and heave her Double Ds. I don't possess the wherewithal. Face in fecund carpet. Skull knocking dewed toilet base. She finishes. Or bores. Either way, the girl orphans me.

vii.

Personality is a flimsy thing on which to build an art. John Cage—no relation to Nicky, to F.F. Coppola—said that. Suppose I should quote it. Or you can, make your own small-nicked distinction between ideas and individuals, here: “ ” (). But don’t take this as my thesis statement. Far as I know John Cage, he’s nothing more than personality himself. At least anymore. That’s what death does; it formulizes someone into a new body. A body of work, the hiss of steam and grind of gears, all vague individuality trapped, meant to produce a neat notion of the posthumous.

But this writing of his, of Cage’s, well I came to it much later, only recently. By this I mean years later than the heavy best friend. I didn’t see her for eleven months, but then, two more moves under my belt, finishing up my senior term, there she is, in my living room. She’s partying with one of my psychology roommates. She’s acne-less, her eyelashes magnificent, a flora all their own. I strolled in my front door and she pointed at me. “Hey, you! You stole my blue sweatshirt!”

I hurried upstairs, but her great sexy laughter chased me. I locked my door and, for a long time, peeked from my window for her to leave. Finally, she did, still laughing, her arm around my muscly, thick-bearded friend. And, I’ll just say it: I couldn’t get over her hair. It wasn’t stringy brown (had I mentioned that it always was, especially during our fateful, lavatory fete?), not anymore, but flowing, blond, and gluttonous with starlight. My friend, he smacked her ass. She stuck it out then for him to do it more, harder. He did, but that’s not relevant. She was at least half the size I’d known her to be, and, well, it didn’t compute. Worse, where did I figure? Had I been the impetus, her launch pad, or nothing at all?

So it is that they slipped into his Buick. Next, they seriously peeled out. Me, though, I couldn't sleep, couldn't wait for him to return home. I fantasized telling the guy our story, this entire filthy history between us, his maudlin reaction. Posed on my sill, I drank coffee after coffee. He never showed. Then, when I saw him the next day, lounging classically on the quad, I realized how bad it would make me look. That I didn't know how to tell of her attacking me—molesting? jumping? *raping*?—as purely comical, flatly bizarre. Instead I strolled up, asked if she had a rocking body. I tried to sound casual, hide my trembles. “Well? Did she? Did she move you deeply?”

He produced a joint, fired it. I couldn't blink. He was studying, like always. Always with a substantial, glossy-fronted, psychology text on his lap, and always exhaling dramatically at his narrow road of sentences.

“Come on, man,” I pleaded, “fill me in.”

Squinting through the haze he regarded me with melting eyes. “Dude,” he said, “her body? Rocking? Deeply? Dude, I'm a discursivist. But not a very good one, not yet. I mean, I'm just getting my confidence. So, look, I'm sorry, but I can't talk about human interaction, not while I'm interacting. Don't you see? I could totally destroy myself.”

PARALYZED BY THE IMMEDIATE

Amidst marriage death-throes, Wife gets the house and Protagonist splits. Takes a few duffels. Heads off to the other side of their meager town. Off to crash on the matted carpet of Best Friend's rental and diligently throw the whole pity party. Every morning, every night, here's Protagonist wallowing. Lost in the saddest songs a man might unearth. Leonard "Blue Raincoat" Cohen looping slowly, melodramatically. Protagonist mopes in low light. He masticates too-big mouthfuls of generic cereals, of tasteless pot pies, stops brushing his teeth, changing clothes. Instead of staking out an apartment of his own, Protagonist, the ripe sucker he believes he must be, desponds with unparalleled determination.

He's late twenties. A new understanding's dawning. That mortality's not so much an increasing pressure as it is the loud rasping from the battening down of once-yawning options. So trapped by this ideology, Protagonist begins a regimen of absurdly long showers. This ritual whenever Best Friend steps out. Three, four times a day. No more Cohen, only Morphine and Mazzy Star thrumming Best Friend's ginormous speakers. Protagonist's got cherry candles flickering in the sink. He's got too much dandruff shampoo searing his sudden vineyard of hemorrhoids. But he relishes the pain. He drools tap water down his chest and practices his mantra until the hot shits out: *Zero Choice. To avoid a lifetime of high blood pressure, of crushing resentment, Wife and I have Zero Choice.*

Two weeks later. Two full weeks of championship brooding, of Protagonist squatting with Best Friend, when Best Friend comes home and just declares he's called it quits on Fiancée. Naturally, Protagonist hears the news and blames himself. Naturally. Because such an act by Best Friend is assuredly Protagonist's fault. Must be. Due to all of Protagonist's scorn for the evils of marriage. Three years strong, those lovebirds, and then Best Friend's done in a snap? What else could it be? Obviously, steeped in all of Protagonist's wretched energy, Best Friend, the poor, sodden tard, succumbed by association.

Darkly thrilled with this idea, Protagonist believes himself double guilty. He makes insinuations of fleeing far northward. Says he'll go fish the Bering Sea, maybe lose a paw to crabbing, maybe get flung in near-suicide into that arctic black belly. Best Friend doesn't respond. Doesn't seem to care. Best Friend's in the best mood of his life. Guy's practically prancing around with freedom's fever. He's ready to move on, start afresh, clear the air. Best Friend starts boxing their stuff and talking about new homes as new lives. He starts smiling sagely and saying things to Protagonist like, "Did you see the grace of tonight's sunset?" or "When life give you lemonade, make fucking lemon *bars!*"

If a tree faints in the forest, right? Like without someone to mope for, is it moping at all? Protagonist gets the message. He wants to be proactive, wants to be positive like Best Friend. So Protagonist gets on the housing ball. Within two days, he's drummed-up a swell two-room by the airstrip. Even dishes for the deposit. Even the first and last month's rent. It works. Protagonist's mood shifts tectonically. He's rashly slaphappy. He's disgustingly excited over the notion of these their new bona fide bachelor digs.

Protagonist is daydreaming again. Envisioning pairs of sexually-aggressive coeds coming over to watch soft-core with him and Best Friend. Much younger girls than Fiancée and Wife. Girls with naughty piercings and inclinations to try and outdrink him—Good luck, kittens! But also Protagonist is envisioning the men's new kitchen cluttered with gear. With fishing and camping and muscle-building material. With all manner of adventure vehicles, like fuck commitment, let's par-tay.

But when Protagonist tells Best Friend these fantasies, tells Best Friend of the rental they have secured, what does Best Friend do? He avoids Protagonist's face. He does. He picks at his teeth and he says, "Why, man, why?" He says, "Why'd you do that?" and "Dude, I mean, oh, man, but I'm sure I told you that I'd already made my own deal..."

Best Friend means deal with Wife. And no, he hadn't sung a word. Protagonist's chest feels abruptly hollow, his veins violently dry. The deal's this: Best Friend's going to remodel Protagonist's old, detached garage. Then Best Friend will move on in. Wham-bam. Best Friend with his own cozy man-cave in the shadow of Protagonist's tattered life.

What Protagonist is hearing he can't believe he believes. He's squinting at Best Friend's dumbed-up and blinking eyes, squinting as Best Friend says, "Cool? Cool." But Protagonist's very thoughts go bald. "*Uh, uh, uh,*" is what Protagonist stutters. A whole world spinning away. A whole paradigm jerking out into the small distances with the sound of "*uh, uh, uh.*"

Not ten days later. Here's Protagonist. He's lugging the last of his dusty paraphernalia out of the ex-garage. He's secured a dilapidated studio. Not even a studio, but a converted carriage house. The shack's got a seven percent grade north to south. Drunk, Protagonist can roll with little of his own effort from the moldy kitchen to the moldy bedroom. It's behind Conoco, the miserable dive is. Smells of carwash and microwaved chimichangas. And the rental's unruly vented water heater keeps Protagonist continually fume-dizzy. Sure, this is redeeming in a sense. It aids Protagonist's notions of victimization—Jesus, so sad-bastard is the man he confuses nausea with grief.

But moving one's stuff out of one's own home when one doesn't want to and when one's Best Friend is moving in—ultimate humiliation. Protagonist is forced to scoot around Best Friend. It's like some insufferable, high-school freshman at the Senior Class party. *Oops, sorry, hey, mind if I...?* This while Best Friend's just whistling away, just framing away. Like Best Friend's so content with a life of stacking drywall. Look at him go, his fresh lease on life. Ah, away from Fiancée at last, away from that woman's intolerable kid-want, marriage-want, family-want.

... oh, sorry, I'm just gonna ... slip around you here ... grab another box of spoiled memories...

After two hours Best Friend finally takes Protagonist into account. As if his generosity is positively overflowing, Best Friend sets down his saber saw, helps. They load a stained loveseat on the sagged roof of Protagonist's decrepit Saturn. Now, like all's kosher, Best Friend goes into Wife's fridge, gets beers. The two men are slurping lagers on the curb. Like that. Like perched in some *Twilight Zone* flip. A reverse for sure

because Protagonist, for once, is lip-locked while Best Friend's gone motor-mouth.

"...of course her garage isn't plumbed so I'll have to piss in the tomato patch. Have to shower in the main house, too. But her garage is the perfect size for me, all I need in this world, her garage."

"*Our* garage," says Protagonist.

"But ... but she bought you out?"

"Not yet."

"Anyway, yeah, but I'm glad to do it. You know, help her with the rent. Rough time for the girl."

"The girl?"

"Right, won't be so easy for me, though, I know. But I'll man-up, man, so worry not. Be a real bitch in winter for me but I'll cross that bridge when summer's gone."

Not so much patiently as dumbly sipping. Here on the curb and Protagonist has run out of words. Best Friend talking and talking. Protagonist barely grunting acknowledgment. This because Protagonist is wondering if Wife's currently home. If, say, Wife's framed in a light-blinded window behind him? If she's staring connivingly at the two men's backs and if this whole, ludicrous event is some plot she's concocted. That she begged Best Friend to move in because she wants something to burst between the boys. Furious brawl, a fight to the finish. Surely, yes. Come on, with Best Friend always the stronger, always the faster. Ah, but Protagonist—goes without saying—he's Captain Impetuous, black scrapper, sandbagger.

Did she? Is Wife in the window wringing ring-less hands? Wife hoping Best

Friend'll crush Protagonist's jaw, cuff off his ears, render Protagonist perfectly innocuous, perfectly repulsive so she's never attracted to him again, to his pain—*My god, what is that thing?*

Hello! My name is Betrayed Wife! You killed my marriage, prepare to die!

Here's something prime to note: not but weeks after Wife and Protagonist started seriously dating, a vignette from her. Over a bevy of bottom-shelf cocktails, Wife, eyes sparkling, recounts how her high school beau had his nose pummeled loose in a fight. And she'd watched it all, calmly. But, well, with that event something shifted in her young psyche. A tender, protective force surfaced. After the boyfriend healed, her gaze upon him was certainly more deep and friendly-true, but, also never again could she achieve orgasm with said fellow.

"Or, not until you," she told Protagonist.

"Stop it," Protagonist said.

"Rough me up," she replied.

"As you wish."

And Protagonist did. Always did his best. Though Wife was tremendously strong.

"At least," Best Friend declares—this after his last sip and a protracted and highly satisfied sigh—stretching his strong, hairy legs straight out from the curb, "she still gives you the benefit of the doubt."

Protagonist stands in response. He's had quite enough. He tosses Best Friend his empty bottle and mutters, "A truly stupid thing to say, man. Benefit of the how? The

what of the what?"

Best Friend frowns. "Is everything cool, man? Are you ... mad at me?"

Protagonist shakes his head. Or it's more of a figure nine. He says, "Exactly." He climbs in his Saturn. The burdened roof squashes his neck but still he drives off with something like intensity.

Drives the four blocks to his fume-choked hovel. Takes seven pinches of warm, cheap gin off a big-handled bottle. Wrestles his loveseat off the car roof. After arranging the little sofa on the wood-groaning porch, he sits with a face full of remarkable determination. He watches a magpie waver free of the Conoco dumpster. There's something big and flat and peanut-shaped squeezed in its beak. Protagonist thinks this is a fine idea. He gets up, hurries to the gas station, returns. Sits, stands, gets the gin, sits again. This time with even more determination than before.

Nutter Butters. Protagonist sets to gnawing an entire sleeve of the cookies. Gnawing and listening to the larger world. His white-trash neighbors' children squawk and fart. They're too young for their pale, unctuous bodies. On a rusty trampoline, they're flinging their Wonder Bread muscles at each other. Another time, years before, at a house party, a girl ground a cigarette into Protagonist's face. He's recalling this memory, and the gin is hot like tea. But Wife, as pre-Wife, wasn't there to see the burning of the cheek. Didn't see how Protagonist didn't so much as blink at his feminine attacker. Rooted and simply letting the assault happen. Protagonist kept his gaze locked on the girl's steroidal boyfriend. And this boyfriend, he was in the midst of asking Protagonist to throw down. The jock was smiling falsely and juggling his pectoral muscles and leaning in and over a

very skinny Protagonist to say, “Let’s go throw down, you and me. Let’s throw down any time. We can throw down, man, now, ’cause I’ll throw down with you right here! You afraid to throw down? Don’t want to throw down? Oh, I get it, throwing down isn’t your style?” This when the guy’s girlfriend, cocaine-eyed, succulent and godless, stepped between them. She pushed the burning cherry into Protagonist’s jawbone. It sizzled and stunk.

Next door, the trampoline gives a buzzing, tearing sound. The kids are sobbing. Protagonist barely hears it. He’s brushing crumbs from his somehow-now-bare chest and wondering after a connection. Any connection. Please.

The last Buttered Nutter has been eaten. Protagonist makes a series of very grave faces. He does so at the pinkening sky. The sun, like usual, could care less about him, just sets. Aloud, he says, and maybe to its absolutist fumes, “You and me, Poser, here we sink. On a loveseat. Love! Seat! Sunk with our own passion, with our own hoarded source of so much forever-burning gas... Hey, *anybody want a peanut?*”

In dew-licked stiff of morning, Protagonist wakes. On the bowed porch, on the malodorous loveseat. He’s cramped. He’s shivering. Now the adults, the parents of the jumping children, are sitting spread-leg on the rusty trampoline. They are facing Protagonist and smoking and drinking king-size sodas and looking at him. They are snickering to each other, so when he waves they don’t wave back.

Wherein Protagonist decides, with logistics and whatnot, he and Best Friend require some serious space.

It's three weeks living in the carriage house. Protagonist has adapted to the headaches. Has grown accustomed to, if not fond of, the gasoline taste along the sides of his tongue. Today is a clear, early-summer evening. Protagonist realizes he's settled as much as he ever will. Means it's high-time for fishing. But not *just* fishing, no. He must fish the legendary waters of sweet Noochew Creek. Packs his rod, his vest, his luckiest needle-nose pliers. Makes a break for it.

But only a block away, caught. For he stupidly looks at his hands. A mistake. There they are, on the steering wheel, and there it is, that melanin-deprived band where his ring had been. Protagonist feels immediately limbless. A quadriplegic sloth, or close to it. He looks at the passenger seat. Empty. What is he doing? Stupidly idling, that's what. Stuck here in his scrap of sputtering ABS plastic on a huge and spinning planet in the first years of a New Millennium that will never remember him. Stuck here with no motivation and no reason. Here before this absurdly red stop sign that could never stop a speeding car. Here beside this tourist-packed gas station and its growling air-pressure machine thirsting for quarters, money for air, or not really the air, only the force, right?

One minute, two, three. Idling, going, *uh, uh, uh*, until a teenage mother appears. She's got a face like a twice-retired greyhound, and all her clothes are pastel fleece Patagonia. Her back is hunched in pulling. What she's pulling is her reposed and impossibly opulent child. The kid's a real prick. One of those with the dismissive expressions of some too-young billionaire. He's draped out in a plastic wagon like he owns the world, and they're obviously headed for Sonic, headed for a cherry-limeade fix. This happening feet in front of Protagonist's overheating Saturn. Jesus buttfucking babies! thinks Protagonist. Jesus, look at these two yapped-out plebeians! And *I'm* lost?

I'm alone? Har! Har, har, har—

Thank you, the Mother mouths at Protagonist, her eyes momentarily not dead.
You're welcome, Protagonist mouths back, and the car behind him honks.

Protagonist waves. Protagonist thanks the honkers for what they cannot know, and drives on. He passes his former street in slow, slow motion. He tells himself, no, nope, no way. Tells himself that Best Friend has no phone—and so there, that solves it. Or, well, no phone in the garage, so there. Protagonist tells himself, Hey yeah sure we can fish another time because screw it if I'm dropping by on a whim what with the possibility of encountering Wife so come on you pussy because it's just fishing—

Honking. Again.

Protagonist only thought he'd been driving.

He waves once more and actually rolls.

Limbless and wildly exposed. Lord, that's the feeling going it alone. But once Protagonist escapes town, zooms away from those ghostly streets, passes McDonald's and the back of the Welcome to Gunnison sign, once he passes the cemetery and the world gives way to ranchland and stubby rock hills, his whole upper body fills with a glorious and indignant strength. Crisp wind in his hair. Foot firmly to the pedal. His mouth pops open and he says, "Ate ol' granny in a choo-choo car!"

He laughs. He coos, "Hm." He asks himself, "What's that from?" He can't remember and cranks the radio. Up, up, up to sing-along levels. Floors the Saturn, hears her shiver and grind. Soon he's really belting them out—*Love Shack*, *My Prerogative*, *Brass Monkey*. A string of bubbly hits from his junior-high years. One to the next they

come gurgling. Like a prophecy. Like positively gospel. Protagonist is snapping his fingers, rocking his loins. That's right, very licentiously. Playfully rubbing his crotch against the bottom of the steering wheel in a demonstration of his conclusive OK-ness. How he can so not give a shit. Can do so as well as any Mountain-Dewed teenager. Why? Because age is irrelevant, motherfucker. Because friendship with the self must come first and forevermost.

Protagonist curls his lip a la Billy Idol. He flips off an entire field of redundant cows.

Though a substantial drive out to the creek, Protagonist does not tire of his antics. More so, with every eaten mile of asphalt, his levels rise. On a double-line, he passes a faux wood-paneled wagon. Just cuts them off. It's an Indiana family. They can do nothing about it. They do nothing about it. "*In a sixty-nine,*" Protagonist bellows back at them, "*my humpty nose'll tickle your rears!*"

—Oops, but then he's signaling. Braking fast to not miss his turn. Almost missed the turn. Because usually Best Friend drives. Why? Good question. Well, never again. And if the cockhole is ever again invited. And oh, we'll see, we'll see.

Winding up the cool slice of Highway 14. Driving exactly to the bullet-riddled nine-mile marker. Protagonist parks the limping Saturn as far off the shoulder as the soft embankment allows. He locks her up. He tips his 4 lb.-test line with a sugar-burned Mepps lure. Time's roughly 7:30 pm.

One thing you got to grasp is that this spot doesn't exist. Not to the majority of the

planet. A sobering thought, Protagonist thinks. Meaning most of the lower Nooche Valley is private and only for these three hundred yards is the stream public access. But public by my bright white ass, thinks Protagonist. For so hidden is it by a barricade of brush no one has a clue. Except Best Friend. Best Friend first showed Protagonist this place. But years before, that was. When they'd first met, in college. When they'd never let anyone come between them and their precious angling.

Protagonist follows their same spraining path as always. Fights his way in. Scraping the bare on his arms until he finds himself on the soft moss banks and inhaling twilight. The light's divine. Sun just drinkable, golden gal's balanced on the lip of Upper Nooche Canyon, and every mote's illuminated. Got forty-five minutes, Protagonist estimates, until dark. And all his, he tries telling himself. Yes, for once, yours—no sharing with that goddamned Judas.

Stepping into these cleanest of waters. Protagonist jerks upstream, knee-deep in snowmelt. Cold as areolas on a Narnian sorceress. Oh boy, and do his feet scream mercy. But the casting keeps his mind from the pain. That's key. Get thinking on physical frailty and you'll charm the gamut—emotional, spiritual, sexual. You'll start dwelling on how you met Wife. How, some six years before, you two fell in love at this little college in this little hometown of yours, and then you went out into the real world and it was so much more than just the two of you, and it required everything and more, and so you moved back, both of you, mutually, with the belief that it would fix everything, your flailing marriage, living back near those friends of the past, those who never left, those like Best Friend, like the Best Friend who was always telling you, you and her, during

your marriage, over and over, how, no, he'll probably never marry because he's only met one perfect woman and she's his best friend and she's married to his best friend, and how this, and how that, and before you know it you're freezing and not fishing at all and your whole week's polluted and your soul belongs to anyone but you, so keep casting, asshole, go, go, go—

Casting. Casting. It works, keeps Protagonist rightly fluid. Keeps his mind off life's overpowering logos. Off the swarming bugs, too. So many bugs drawn to the creek's clean, sloshing life. Mosquitoes wanting blood, gnats wanting eye-goo. A whining galaxy around Protagonist's head, but that's a fantastic omen. And Protagonist, he isn't a DEET user. Instead, he eats three cloves of garlic before a trip, and that does the trick. Also keeps his belches fresh for blowing at Best Friend, getting the guy swatting the air, growling, *Knock it off, you fucking two-year-old*. And who needs that passive-aggressive taintscribble anyhow? Who, huh, when Protagonist here has so many flies? There're more than usual out this fine night, and big slow black ones. Unlike the gnats and mosquitoes, the flies are just buddies. Merely wanting company, they are. Protagonist likes the idea of them clinging to his chest, his shoulders and neck. Not interested in blood, the flies, only wanting to be noticed, their fleeting existence justified—

Ah, see, *these* are proper casting thoughts. Lure shimmering back to you faster than the current as you let childhood questions, in all their raging absurdity occupy, the brain. Nature's silliness. Do birds have leg muscles? Do fish have spit? Why does it feel so weird to drink cold water out of a dark mug? And you're not only warm then, but part

of the creek. Current sucking around your heavy jeans, burning your shins until they're stiff and dull, and your toes web, and your feet glide accurately over the slick rocks, casting and casting...

On his eighth toss, goldness. Rod bends hard. Protagonist tugs a long, bright, two-pound Brown from a deep channel under low-bank scrub. He's holding the beauty in the water. He's tenderly turning her. He's taking a moment before the release to simply savor. Just a moment where this fish is every fish he's ever caught and will ever catch. The collapse of time into sublime present, cradling the trout in burning clean flow and smiling quietly. But then Protagonist is startled by a sound. Flat, dry flapping. He doesn't recognize it. He looks up, around. No other fishermen, no ranchers, only his halo of insects.

Protagonist can't place the sound's proximity. It isn't scary, but his heart picks-up pace. A beaver? But why so dry, so subtle? The sound stops.

No. No beavers on the Noochew. Not anymore, not a chance. Holding that fish, frozen midstream, Protagonist, face all stone and listening hard. He squints desperately for a resound. He gets nothing.

Years ago, The Mexican first told Best Friend about Noochew. This around when Best Friend first brought Protagonist into the fishing fold. Back then the whole Noochew Valley was Beaver Heaven. One chain of lush cool ponds for twenty miles. But a flood of wannabe ranchers moved in. Texas, Jersey, Florida. Using .30/06s the play cowboys patiently executed every last log-hound. For a long while, Best Friend and Protagonist

were finding carcasses every sixty feet or so. Lodged under trees, rotting on the banks as great, greasy wigs. Fifty-pounders bloated in the sun's heat to the size of bears. Those libertarian devils even took dynamite, blew the dams, said it was private property, said they had the right.

Bad stuff, sure. But even worse was Division of Wildlife not fighting back. Just some out-of-court settlement and people got back to their business. People, not the Noochew. When the dams blew, detritus dispersed to fine silt, thickened the stream, suffocated the fish. Pretty much wiped out the Brook trout.

Boo-hoo, sure. Though the even greater travesty was the Brookies were just recouping, see. Barely prior to the holocaust by those New Westerners, a fertilizer truck, its pilot aced on meth, took a corner too fast and dumped his load at the sixteen-mile marker. Washed the length. White specks of poison. Before that, Noochew had the biggest Brookies in Colorado, eighteen-inchers on every cast, but post-fertilizer the population went circus-freak. Fish with heads meant for eighteen-inchers, but on six-inch bodies. Backward fins. Gills grown through mouths. Real Blinky and the Simpsons fare.

Is this it? What Protagonist is doing up here right now? This evening, alone, when he could have fished a closer, easier creek? Seeking signs of normality? A gesture that things recoup in their own mutated way? Forty seconds, Protagonist waits. Forty seconds or even a full minute. The sound doesn't reoccur. He gets back to his Brown. Works the hook from her lower lip, holds her head to the current until she darts out of his hands. Thigh-deep, he is. Jeans tugging in the smooth water and chill all gone now, so he lugs on.

Casting upstream, grunting, smiling. Fifty more feet and it's the noise again. And closer. *Has* to be closer. Not louder, but more, what?—intimate. Yet the proximity is still off. Like it could be coming from the sun as easy as inside his ear.

Not a beaver, but an otter? This idea gets Protagonist birthday-boy stoked. Talk about extinction! Spotting an otter would be something for the town paper. Forget that, for the very pages of *The Denver Post*. He crouches, lip-licking, wet to his balls. Narrowing his eyes, Protagonist waits. He pats his vest. Yes, his camera's there.

A small disposable number. Always handy since he rarely keeps what he catches. Especially fishing the Noochew with its circus population. You need evidence. With the camera no one can say you and Best Friend are yanking their chains. Keep little tape-measures on hand, too. Mostly it's a novelty competition. Who can catch the strangest thing, get the one-up. Best Friend has a photo of a Rainbow, very much alive and flopping, not monstrous or anything, but with a rusted bobber-sinker-hook combo grown right through its middle. Protagonist's paragon snap is a twenty-inch Brookie—unheard of in Colorado anymore—and the thing has a minnow's tail sticking half out of its jaw.

The Mexican, he started the whole disposable camera routine. Rest his mo-lay-sauce soul, he took the cake. Protagonist doesn't figure, even with a family of otters on record, he could beat The Mexican. Years back the guy hauled a four-pound Rainbow from Spring Creek, cut it open, and found an entire litter of field mice. Five barely-digested tiny mammals all side-by-side. Luck having it, The Mexican had a camera in his car. Long before Photoshop, this was. And Best Friend and Protagonist, they stared at that picture for hours trying to figure how he did it. Greasing their bodies, wedging them

in. Finally they relented to magnificent actuality.

The Mexican had talked before of catching German Browns with mice in the belly. Talked, but they'd laughed him off. So he'd say, "Fine, bitches, but that's how my Ute uncle used to land all the records, fucking field mice, man."

"Not so!"

"Hell yes so! Hooked through the skin of the back and let 'em paddle across a hole. For real. And it's like Great Whites going for surfers, just—*Bam!*"

Best Friend and Protagonist started setting cereal-bait traps. Out in McCabe's Wetlands. And, well, fact's fact. With mice they caught behemoths every time—Protagonist's finest beauty at nine pounds, Best Friend's at eleven. Except the trick wore on Protagonist. You grip the fuzzy little mouse behind the skull so it can't bite as you pierce the flesh. Right over the spine and the sounds they make are just too big for that handful of lint. A symphony of pain in your palm—gets you high and sick all at once. Spirit swelling, splitting open the meager body.

Or like this: the moment you cum in a woman who's not Wife. The moment your sacrifice starts swimming and you know it won't make it, the guilt turning shadowed circles just below. Then getting dressed. Then going home. Then not having a home and, somehow, finally, proud of yourself but for no idea why, and so disgusted, belittled, by your own confusion.

Best Friend is fine with it, always. Protagonist though, he can only use the mouse trick every few months. Sickens him. Swears never again, never, but still the desire

always returns. A bigger fish, the possibility of beating Best Friend's record. Building and building until Protagonist *has* to do it. And that's the question, isn't it—did he ever love Wife? Even now he can't say. No. For where to look for proof?

But spotting animals on the banks of a creek, catching them on film, showing them off, that's a manner of easy truth. Beyond just fish, Protagonist has hundreds of wildlife pictures. He's caught bighorn, coyote, bobcat, fox. Once he snapped thirty frames of a moose, south of town, by Twin Lakes. Moose are rare in Southern Colorado, unheard of up until a decade ago.

Corny, but it feels like the animals *allow* him to see them. Beasts granting him that moment of their vulnerability and mystery. It's sacred to Protagonist. Sacred, but he always wants one more, a lynx, wolverine, otter. Yeah, or a big live goddamn beaver on the Noochew—

Thinking just this when a second flat slap comes and goes.

Still he spies nothing. What can one do but keep fishing?

Twenty minutes of light left, maybe. Cast, plunk, reel. Probably, he's telling himself, just a muskrat slipping into the water. Or a lunker jumping. Landing perfectly on its broad side in a smooth eddy. Cast, plunk, reel. And he doesn't care now about catching any more fish. He practices dropping his lure two feet beyond an upstream boulder, weaving it around into the still. Only beavers slap their tails when alarmed. In the beavers' void had muskrats picked up the slack? And if that were possible, what about a hybrid? Half-beaver half-muskrat? Maybe that wicked fertilizer fully-circled? Musker. Beaverat. "And I'll *never* show you that photo, asshole!" Protagonist yells.

His outburst startles him. “That’s right! Jesus, any of you! I’ll hoard it for life!” Except, he tells himself, well, except from Judy. Of course he’ll give the photo to Mother-in-Law. She’s the only one who’d truly appreciate it. No competition, no question why he’s showing her, just a mutual love. It’s why Protagonist sends her copies of every photo he takes. Even now, at this miserable point, even after he and Wife have firmly split. Even though Mother-in-Law returns all his letters unopened. But this, Protagonist is certain, would be different. Half-beaver, half-muskrat! Oh, M-I-L, she’d sense it beyond his blank envelope. The woman, she’d open it with flourish and write back immediately. Long, sweeping cursive—*My God and this will be our secret and only we will know the truth of what nature can do—*

the X’s and O’s by her signature—

Slap!

There it is again! Midcast, Protagonist reels in fast but so quietly. Night air cool on his blood-roaring face. Jeans sopped to the belt. Oh, but he’s going to see it this time! Needing both hands to get his camera, to work the zipper. Protagonist pinches his rod under his left arm, tip up, lure clanking.

But then it jerks. His rod, it jerks upward, hard. The sensation makes his belly leap. Protagonist’s first thought is that someone’s sneaked up on him. He spins around ready to see Best Friend but the guy’s not there. No, though the flapping is. Yes, and it’s all over the place. It’s right at his ear. Circling his head. He’s looking up to see a dark flurry against the barely lighter sky. A bat? *A bat.*

A small, brown bat’s hooked itself on his lure. It smacks Protagonist’s head,

leathered kisses along his ear and neck, metal and wing click-clicking.

Holding the rod up and away, Protagonist bulls from the creek. Needs a level section of bank. The creature's no bigger than a sparrow. Like half-sparrow, half-mouse. Lowering the rod, Protagonist tries to collect his wits. Thoughts of rabies. Thoughts of how he can't kill the thing. How wonderful and tragic this all is. Goddamn it, where the hell's Best Friend?

The frantic creature smacks the pale stones, lifts off again, smacks. Protagonist is growling no, no. He's telling it to stop. *Please. You're fucking killing yourself.* But it can't. Throwing pebbles, not making a squeak.

Pinning the rod with a soggy boot, Protagonist grabs the flailing line. Hand-over-fist he goes. Goes until he gets it grounded. But now what? Needs a photo, sure. But damn if his camera isn't gone. He pats his vest knowing he's dropped it in the river, but not wanting to believe it. Even as he looks over and spies the yellow casing lodged on the creek's far side. Protagonist berates himself. Knuckles, elbows trembling, feet and knees too, he's going, *Dumb fuck* and *loser* and *King of all Blame*—

But this is only the first of the bad, bad anger. Not sadness anymore, no. Raw, boiling hate at himself and this poor, goddamned bat. At the dying sun and all those fucking magazine ranchers to boot. Nobody thinking about mystery or legacy, only about the narrowest definition, the stiff, unyielding future against some utopic past of *fuck fuck fuck*.

Eyes blurry. He's stroking the mini-beast, is what. Protagonist is stuttering and

studying the bat's delicate wings. Losing light by the second, but Protagonist can't seem to act beyond stroking, stroking. Fingers too cold or swollen. Every hypothesis doomed anyway.

But look. Wait. Clear your eyes, man. See that? The treble hook hasn't pierced its jaw or body. Only two prongs slipped through the leathery tip of the left wing. See? Meaning you don't see why it can't be saved ... you just don't see how someone like you could possibly do the saving.

Squatted, brain quaking. Protagonist is paralyzed by the immediate, some Sartre inveigled in freedom, like this he's thinking about how, once, before the cameras, before he died, The Mexican pulled a giant sucker fish out of the reservoir. The Mexican, he's chopping the fish for bait until he finds a live crawdad in the long, purple stomach. Tiny crustaceans are normally brown, but this one's bleached garish white from belly acid and still kicking. Vamp they call him, and nurse the crawdad back to health. Put him in a tank on The Mexican's kitchen table. Feed their little pinchster ham and salmon eggs. Bigger and bigger bits. Eventually live minnows. Soon Vamp's four times on his original size, but still blanched as ever.

Then they release him back into the reservoir. The four of them. All toasting Vamp off with Jamison, back into the deep, and Wife, as pre-Wife, she's there and she's crying and crying. Exactly, *why?*—that's what Protagonist wanted to know. Rarely, before or after the wedding, did Wife cry over their relationship—maybe a trickle, but never a sob. But there she was with body-wracked bawling over Vamp. And so what had Protagonist done? Back home, that night, he waited for her to do something annoying,

something trivial, and then lit in good, growling, *No, no, we're going to end up like your parents and I can fucking see it! The grudges, the quiet hating—one day we'll stop talking altogether, won't we? Won't we, Judy?*

Or had Wife even introduced him to Judy at that point?

Why can't Protagonist remember?

In near blackness, Noochew's gurgle turns up its volume and there Protagonist kneels. Over his little bat. Until it stops fighting. Splayed upright, breathing evenly, its wings out, its black-bead eyes fixed, needing to trust him. Protagonist removes his fishing vest, his shirt. He takes his time. Gently wraps the shirt around the creature, and then slips back into his vest. Now lifting the fabric package in one hand. Now his rod, the line slack, in the other. Checking that the tiny guy's still breathing. Checking and checking, and they make it back to the Saturn. Protagonist arranges the bundle in the back seat. He says, "Give us a fucking break, God. Right?"

Best Friend's car is here, at Wife's. Good. And Wife's truck isn't, good. Pulling to the curb, again making sure the bat is alive. Feeling its minor pulse through the thin cotton... good, good. Protagonist hurries off. Knocks on the garage's new, side door. It's got a glass window. He peeks in. Best Friend's modest apartment. The light is on, but nothing's moving. Protagonist tries the door. He calls, "Hello? Man?" And suddenly he's so curious to see what Best Friend's managed to do with the place, covering up the emptiness.

It's unlocked. Protagonist steps into the warm and bright. Best Friend has plush

carpet down, pictures on the walls, shelves with lush plants. It hits Protagonist that he needs to check to see that Best Friend doesn't have any of his things. Because when he was staying with Best Friend, what if Best Friend had borrowed some CDs or books? Borrowed some clothes or lures without telling?

"He's not here."

Protagonist doesn't turn around. He shuts Best Friend's door, gently steps out backwards. Wife has turned on the floodlight between the house and the garage. She says, "He took my truck to his girlfriend's place."

That bulky boyfriend, that big jock, the one from way back, from the party, the porch, well the guy made an owl noise when his girlfriend's cigarette has seethed into Protagonist's cheek. *Ooo, Ooo*. A sad, desperate calling out. The guy's shoulders withered and he knocked her hand away, knocked the cigarette down. Very hard. Then his eyes lit up with glassy tears and his voice went high with apologies. Any equation he'd been working with, any hierarchy of bravado, just crumpled up on him. He pushed his girlfriend off the porch. He took Protagonist's much smaller fist, took it with both hands like a preacher, and told him to hurry, get Neosporin.

Beautiful moment! Shining with negations of both love and hate. Pre-Wife, she totally missed it. She was inside learning foosball. This because she wanted to wallop Protagonist someday, and that was their affection. That was when their want for each other made chemical sense. There was a competition back then, in their musky origins, that flung the young couple at each other in sexy and enormous ways. But was it the same competition that spilt them apart? Could it be? That stole their focus from each other,

abandoned it to the hugeness of the world?

“Girlfriend?” Protagonist says. “Back with his fiancée?”

“No. A new girlfriend.”

Only now does Protagonist turn, face her. Wife’s arms are crossed. She’s side-lit, stark. Protagonist hasn’t seen her in weeks and here she is, much too real. And so thin, so pale. Her face somehow much older. It make Protagonist almost happy, her waneness. Happy until he starts wondering how he’s taking the wear. Wife says, and unemotionally, “I promise to tell him you dropped by.”

“You promise?”

“He’ll call you.”

Rooted, shaking his head, Protagonist thinks, Christ, when did Best Friend get a girlfriend? And why’s Wife talking to me, talking so calmly? Past her, Protagonist stares at their laundry room window. He remembers how they didn’t have a proper vent on that drier, only a water trap at the end of the exhaust tube to catch the lint. Stupid rig-job, worthless patch. Wife nods. The motion grabs his eye. She’s focused on his wet pants. She says, “Catch anything?”

Protagonist wags his head at the garage. “His place is way nicer than mine.”

Wife shrugs, drops her eyes. She gives a terse smile, and suddenly she’s Judy. God, and does Protagonist ever miss Judy. How the woman cradles her elbows in her palms, the one foot-forward stance, the crisp-cut of her brown hair, that strong neck. Mother-in-Law, she was always telling him how great he was for their family, how they’d finally got a man with emotions. She was always saying, “Hey, so maybe your

faith in yourself is weak, all bruised from a legalistic childhood, but you'll get it back, you'll be the man God means you to be..."

"Got a second?" Protagonist says, but Wife doesn't speak. Only looks up, hardens her eyes like she's read his thoughts. So he says, "Really, can I show you something important? Just real quick?" Without her answer, he heads for his car. Feet sloshing, toes bad cold, cold in his shins, his knees. It's full night now and all Protagonist has on top is his thin fishing vest. At the curb, he says, and loudly, "A second of your time."

He hears Wife moving, following but staying feet back. This gets his blood roaring. Keep it mellow, he tells himself. Easy, boy, easy. He leans in the Saturn's backseat. The dome light's busted. Back-lit by the floodlight, everything's too dark. Carefully, Protagonist feels around. He grabs the fishing line where it streams out of his pole tip, out from under his shirt.

"Jesus Christ, what're we doing?" But Wife also steps closer, and her voice isn't so much resentment as worry. She step to the curb, tries peering over his shoulder. Protagonist can hear her breathing quicken. "What—what is it?"

His back to her. His bare arms, bare neck. "Something I found."

"You found?"

"That found me."

"I'm going in."

"I understand."

But Wife doesn't go in, won't. And Best Friend has a girlfriend. And Protagonist has gone fishing alone. But more, here's Wife as Mother-in-Law and Mother-in-Law as

Best Friend, and this all means something, it must. Protagonist knows it must. Wife, she knows it, too. She says, “I’m not joking, I’m going in.”

“OK,” he says. “Wait,” he says, and he’s trying not to beg. Protagonist unravels the shirt. Someone else needs to see this, must, or else, or else. But of course the bat’s dead. He knew it walking to the car. Two fingers on the down of its small belly. Hint of warmth. Wife’s breath brushing his shoulder before she so quickly steps back.

ON YOUR GUARD

Summer of '77, but I can't be sure. I'm born in '74. Point is Big Sis and I perch at the sprawling table in that pale yellow kitchen of yellow cabinets and yellow counters. We perch so calmly I'm wondering if we can even call what's coming violence. Shoveling granola in my puny towhead. The thirsty spectator. Placid, because I'm enjoying it all, at least for now—this, my first memory, yellow.

And before the yellow, the place on Walnut Street. But as much as I wish to recall that first house, all I have are Mom's yarns. Soaring Victorian ceilings and a multitude of rabid squirrels teeming behind the lathe and plaster. Twenty-four-seven they're squealing and gnawing and squirting hot-black disease seeds. A plague Hell-sent to disquiet our hearts. To keep our family forever Out of the Spirit. A constant faith required. Our young family sweat-pressing palms to shivering walls, filling our mouths with spit, demanding Jesus obliterate the vermin. He might have, I think, in His Wisdom and Grace, but instead we just moved.

To State Line, to this yellow kitchen. Missouri. At the table with Big Sis, and across the street's Kansas with a steep grassy slope where Dad lets us summer sled. WD40 on plastic toboggans and so finish your breakfast, guys, he's saying, then we'll go. Though we're in no rush. Dad's brought the TV into the kitchen. He's letting us boob-tube it while he fixes the fridge. He's plunked the black-and-white, its tin-foiled rabbit ears, on the countertop. Rapt and masticating to Captain Kangaroo, I am. One spoonful

then the mechanical next, hardly blinking while Dad, eight feet away, works a stuck bolt. He's trying to grunt the thing to life. Grunting so vehemently that Sis squirms from her chair and hurries over to ratchet the volume.

But when she sits, a commercial airs. Detergent, Barbie, Sonny the Super-fried Cuckoo—doesn't matter. What matters is Mom begins shrieking. "*THOMAS! THOMAS? THOMAS!*" This from deep in the house. Bloodcurdling. Like some junkie's slunk in the window, tried to goose her. Usually when someone screams this way, blindingly, the listener goes Fight-or-Flight. Muscles flexing, belly clenching, adrenal gland in spark—unless, that is, your mother's mine.

The fridge is propped on cinderblocks. Half-eaten by the thing, Dad's been at it since sun-up. "*THOMAS! What did I hear?*" His reaction's merely to pop out a flushed face, that frizzy red hair, and change tools. Though I know he's acknowledging. How barely he pauses. How he huffs and sticks even faster to his work, and so I try this, too. I'm grinding raisins, dates, walnuts: lift spoon, absorb broadcast. Because Mom, understand, is a textbook Christian wife. Been folding laundry in the master bedroom, attending to womanly tasks while Man-Dad does Man Stuff. And whatever she thinks she heard had to travel around three corners, through a partially cracked door, surmount the window fan's massive thrum.

"Tom! That came from the television!"

"Really?" Dad yells, muted by the fridge. *"And what is it you think you heard?"*

"Thomas, why can't you hear me?"

Dad's knee twitches. His foot taps. Sis lifts her spoon, eyes wide, deaf to anything but the Captain who's back with a phalanx of puppets and I want to watch so bad but—

“Are you on your guard, TOM?”

“I’m on the floor, Terri!”

Portentous, Mom emits a howl. It snakes into the kitchen. “THE WORD SAYS BE ON YOUR GUARD LEST YOU’RE CARRIED AWAY BY WICKED MEN!”

My wicker chair squeaks. To be as tall as Sis, I’ve folded my knees under me. Captain K, red-suited, mustached, gabs at Mr. Moose who gabs back and, for zero reason, a deluge of Ping-Pongs covers them, but *why? Ping-Pong balls don’t just fall from the sky...*

“—commands us, Thomas, to raise our children Godly so when they’re older they will not depart!”

“Daddy?” I say. “Um, Mommy’s—”

He slams his heel. Cabinet doors slap. The TV goes awash in squiggles. *“I hear all of you.”*

Mom’s silent. More than silent. She’s a cat gone off to die. Die, but return on ghost paws with skin-shredding vengeance. I know because so far she’s only shrieked. Shrieking, Crying, Silence—these are the three steps. Or not crying, *weeping*. Old Testament gnashing. My ankles going numb, I unfold, bird-squat on my chair.

Dad notices the silence too. Flailing his torso, bucking his hips, he backs out. He exhales softly so Mom won’t hear, “Grant me patience, Lord....”

Or does she hear? Something slams. A closet door, a window. The fan cuts off and her voice is a throaty bellow. “TOO LATE! YOU FAILED TO PROTECT OUR CHILDREN!”

Ah, there’s the weeping. But Dad—he’s ... he’s whistling? The Captain’s song?

He's sitting up, smiling funny, and I'm hissing, "*Sis? Sis?*" but she's lost in the show. She's not seeing how, with such grace, Dad rises. No shirt, chest fiercely white, like something crept from a cave, he moves his arms into stoic-akimbo. He grips his hips. He rotates his back and it pops. Pop, pop, pop, in perfect harmony with Mom's distant, languid weeping...

And now Dad's staring me down while chewing his lip. He taps the wrench on his chest and I lower my spoon. When I do, he shifts focus. And yet, Sis doesn't notice his static gaze. It follows her own, to Captain K, to Mr. Moose laughing. Dad sets down the wrench. His freckled back eclipses the screen and I know what he's going to do.

Like it's already in my head, I know. And Sis must too because she shoves her granola away just as he grabs the TV by the waist, spins and yanks.

An electric sizzle. The Captain's voice as dust settling.

"*THOMAS?*"

But Dad's already in triple-stride to the basement door. He wedges his toe in the crack. Its steep steps and yawning darkness. The door's ancient hinges complain and maybe this is what gives him pause. Maybe this instigates the final lift of the TV above the head. That suspended moment, that Atlas pose before a million tiny apocalypses.

THRIFTSTORE

We are trapped in our salvation. We are awash in the trills of our waking glands. Seventh grade and our fourth new school in as many years. This time it's south Kansas City. It's all plush suburbs and professionally sculpted hedges. Meaning our family's exodus from the I-35 corridor is complete. Whisked beyond that exhaust belch, beyond that cement basement apartment and those too many jelly-fish-pale neighbors watching TV on meager rations of lawn. Graciously, the Lord's heard our prayers. Graciously, the Almighty's landed Dad a fresh pharmacy gig. It's only five miles away, a single day of U-Hauling, but that's all it takes to put Roachland Park Apartments in the rearview.

Boom, flopped smack-dab in pristine golf course country—voila, 2.5 K of split-level square-footage. Understandably, we are aflutter. Understandably, we are thinking Easy Street. Until summer's over and we're tossed in with those gangs of upper-middle-classers. We're bussed off to Week One of ritzy junior high. And instantly miserable, we are, because it's impossible to ghost it per our usual MO. No way can we blend without sporting the requisite Polos and Lacostes, Reeboks and Jams. In a blink, five popular boys get missile lock, and the loudest, the leader, is Caleb.

OK, the lad's a touch tubby, true, but he's peerless with the hair-do. He's peerless with the bronzed skin and those cheeks of glossy rose. We're talking cherubic abundance

in the face and, as such, this attribute easily belies his malevolent soul, his starchy physique. In the end what we're left with is but one possible weakness: the dark mole crouched beside Caleb's button nose (though more on this later). Anyway, it is he, this Caleb, who, with stinging precision, dubs us Thriftstore. Thriftstore, and within days even random eighth-graders are sneering it. *Thriftstore nears! Thriftstore speaks! Thriftstore wells up and spills over!*

A plague, it feels. *Thriftstore*. How the moniker flaps out of overstuffed lockers, lifts from stacks of damp lunch trays, manages even to infiltrate our ears over the loud scratch of compasses. What's to be done? Well, when minus his entourage, this Caleb kid, we shortly recognize, is, mettle-wise, dough. The plan then must be Divide and Conquer. But when?

Thriftstore bides.

A month passes. It's a windy day in the squeaking gymnasium. The silver-spooners fire up the pejoratives. They corner us by the parallel bars to deride our hairless legs, our knobbed knees. They sneer at our distended and chapped lips, at that alien-green plastic mass wedged awkwardly in our head. A bionator, the thing's called, designed to rehabilitate our enweaseled overbite, designed to grant us a better future, but, at present, it's no help at all.

Thriftstore's got a mouthful of bum cum! Swallow the bum cum, Thriftstore! Swallow the bum cum! Swall-Ow! Swall-Ow! Swall-Ow!

Of course the bionator can't be swallowed, *Stupids*, but in order to deliver this very retort or say anything at all comprehensible, we'd have to extract the device. We'd have to fish it from our gaping firth, its insect body slinging drool and clumps of noxious sputum, have to then let it drip-dangle by our corduroy thigh as we attempt to explain that we have a disproportionate jaw relationship, technically termed *malocclusion*.

But worse, or on top of this prospect (and with luck having its sour way), Amy Lyons materializes. Amy Lyons just happens to stroll by in all her year-old glory and overhear the verbal lashing we're taking. Then Amy Lyons, giving us a solid and not unpiteous gander, turns a frosty gaze on those high-collared detractors, and snaps, "Knock it the fuck off."

The gang of boys, they do. Mostly. But not completely. So Amy Lyons pauses. Now Amy Lyons is directly between us and them, and Amy Lyons has more to say. "You guys are either scared of this kid or you're insanely jealous. So which is it? Which one, buttholes? Huh? Cat got your retard tongues?"

Be quiet! Go away! Leave fast, Amy Lyons! Leave and blow us a kiss but go please now—though we surely don't say this. Why? Because such a statement, at best, is only half our desire. Rather, the full and tender and paradoxical fact is that Amy Lyons may not be helping at all—too true, too true—but, *and* simultaneously, her mere acknowledgement of our existence gets the stomach instantly unfettered. As in *Cherish*. Yes—

—that’s the exact word, the word in our head. Cherish, we think, Amy Lyons, Amy Lyons. Oh so sweeter than honey, and oh how we Cherish your ratted-pomp of brown hair and your white eyebrows above those amber frame glasses. Wait, not *simply* amber frame glasses, but thick specs so incoincidentally analogous in both charity and unappreciated insight to our very own thick specs, and so we Cherish her more than immensely but we also recognize how worthless Amy Lyons would be should Amy Lyons mutually Cherish us.

And then if she keeps talking....

And why does she keep talking?

“No, I am *not* fighting the kid’s battles for him.”

Come out, Thriftstore! Quit hiding!

“He’s not hiding. You guys are. Hiding around each other. A bunch of douchebag bullies with nothing better to douche, you bags.”

Oh, the Amy Lyons’ wit! The Amy Lyons’ passion! The Amy Lyons’ biting rectitude! And, no, no Amy Lyons is absolutely right. Amy Lyons will not, *cannot*, fight our battles!

Thus buoyed, our arms, our hands, reply autonomously. They snatch a basketball off a nearby rolling rack. They aim for that dark, little mole, and Caleb’s arms never lift. The blood’s instant, radiant. It sprays artfully across Caleb’s yellow Polo and he tries catching the dollops, but no luck. They seep through his trembling hands. They smack the parquet like slow-snapping fingers.

“He didn’t deserve *that!*”

Amy Lyons is repeating this while Amy Lyons is storming through the gym’s double doors, and we’re stumbling after. We’re a befuddled live-wire dragged in Amy Lyons’ bubblegum-scented wake, and we’re hoping, begging, she’ll say something else, say something more than this, like, who knows, maybe a cursory applauding of our decisive and rogue action?

“He didn’t deserve *that!*” and Amy Lyons is turning to distance. And we’re left watching. And wanting desperately to speak. We want to halt her, pause her with pleas or please or thank-yous, but it seems we can only champ at our bionator and blink. Amy Lyons. Amy Lyons in retreat. Amy Lyons in Sassoon jeans and weighted hips. The simple mechanics of one Amy Lyons leg shifting to the next, and that’s it: Amy Lyons lost around a brick bend... but our arousal not.

Please, Lord, we do not want this unsolicited swelling. To boot, we are confused. We do not see the relationship. How such fleshly desire might stem from an act of violent retribution and a subsequent admonishment for said retribution. Though, OK, we do see how our desire could stem from so sweet a sashaying abandonment. But, nevertheless, we are abandoned. As the arm that threw the ball had seemed verbed on the Spirit, its fingertips, at the sight of Caleb’s wounding, burning in a manner ordained, well, all that’s vanished with Amy Lyons’ vanishing. Even Caleb’s wailings, the cries of his reckoning, have been clipped and sequestered behind heavy gym doors.

Our undergarments continue to billow but we are flooded with distinct emptiness.

This emptiness becomes guilt. This guilt becomes shame. And look, there he is, King David—see how the hero, ever mortal, steps away from his naked and triumphantly-bedded Bathsheba, and see how he steps to his balcony, and how he looks out over his vast kingdom but finds zero satisfaction. This man, he is blank-eyed and blank-hearted. He's overcome with misery, with a need to beg forgiveness, but why and whom and when?

Enough holding forth on our ignominy. We're dangerously exposed. Right out in public with this enpanted monument to Amy Lyons, this palpitating flesh to Amy Lyons' prurient retreat. As it will not subside we are left with no choice but to find quietude and to suffer through and beyond it. Necessarily, we locate a bathroom. We squat atop a seatless john. Suffocated between metallic, Mazanilla green walls, our breath is raucous, uneven. Our hands sweat a profuse and abnormal sweat. Fingers slipping with each check and recheck of the stall lock, but soon enough we remember to recite scripture. Soon, we relocate our calm.

Once again in the presence of a higher mind. Asking Jesus for his speedy and blessed wisdom. *You have not for you ask not.* And forgiveness, of course, that too, Lord, but mostly and certainly and above all else grant us Your blessed wisdom in sorting these frenzied events before we lose what's left of our moral bearings...

One minute, two. Nothing.

Even as the faux Swatch on our wrist ticks away, wisdom remains ungranted.

Why? Alas, there is only one cause. Obviously, we've angered the Father. We've slapped, rather than turned, the other cheek. We've attacked those who persecute us and done so on the instance of a Jezebel. And now we must pay. We must feel our way through the dark sin we've leveraged upon our heart...

Means God's turned his back. It's horrifying. Off the toilet, we're trembling and myopic. We about-face. We bend at the waist. Our sternum flogging, throat quivering, we awkwardly extract the bionator, and heave. This goes on for a time. Then tapers. Down to bile spits into the bowl. Down to merely leaning over, mouth agape, groaning, drooling, but once more calming. Calming until the school intercom improperly pronounces our name: ***NATHEN LIE-DER-BACK. REPORT TO THE PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE. NATHEN LIE-DER-BACK.***

Oh, Lord, please no.

No, this is *good*.

Is it?

Yes, this is wisdom granted. This is Golgotha, the sinner summoned to his oasis of punishment. And that's just what we need. In fact, it's just what we want! Castigation is where forgiveness begins, and so up and at 'em, *Nathen*. Time to report! Nothing to it—simply exit this stall, exit this bathroom, march the hall.

But where mind is willing, flesh is so, so commonly weak. Our body refuses. There, in that green stall, we shake our shouting head and try to manufacture some

impetus. We picture an Etch-a-Sketch. We rattle it. Rattling and rattling. Rattling so the lines, no matter how bold, blur and fade. But they won't, don't. Another minute. Two. It's decided we're a dolt. Our naked Adam and his quivering Eve, ashamed by so much fault bared, ashamed by genitals un-fig-leafed, climb back on their piss stinking perch to grind their bionator and soon the Lord will come calling. Soon, as the Creator through Eden's mists, two teachers will clamor into the bathroom with banging fists, with flinging doors, with scowls that find and flush us, this shivering Jonah.

"Nathan, *our* family turns the other cheek. Our family lets the Lord fight our battles."

Mom won't hold our hand. Mom won't let her heart succumb to our pity by allowing her eyes to drift to ours and then to our quivering lips. It's something new, this phenomenon. Because at all the other schools, in those other, secular principal's offices, she's held our hand. Though at all the other schools, it was we who'd bled.

The principle, he's a bear. Bear of a guy, but with a narrow chickenish head. Behind his desk, he casts his arms wide and feigns surprise. Glancing one way and then the other—this drama for what seems five minutes—he finally allows his pendulum of focus to settle on us. Cold. Beaded. A vulture now, never a chicken, and he says, "It isn't a one-side deal, Pal. I'm always here."

Two fingers the man holds up, and continues. "I'm here waiting, wanting, to not just listen but actively help you."

"Though I stand at the door and knock," Mom says, nodding.

“It’s my job and I’ve got the power,” the principal says, “but it takes two. So who would that be?”

“Nathan?” Mom says. “Nathan? Answer the kind man.”

“You, Sir,” we mutter thickly around our mouthpiece. “You. And me.”

It’s only our first offense, this, and our first visit. Probation’s the verdict. “Think about another scenario,” the principle says, his bear fingers massaging our frail shoulder as he escorts us and Mom to the front lot, “so your father, he’s a pharmacist...?”

“Yes, an expert pharmacist,” says Mom. “Top of his pharmacy class—”

“Assume,” the principle interrupts, “that he gets angry? At the pharmacy? Does he throw a fit? Take it out on his customers? Would that work? Set a good example?”

Mom releases a strained laugh. It means, We won’t admit anything. Then she gets us by the meatless bicep and tugs us toward the car. Halfway there and out of earshot, she growls, “Don’t even think about commenting on that one, Buster.”

Robotic snorts and teeth-grinding and blood trapped high in Dad’s ear-tips as heat pulses his yellowed eyes, but he’s refusing to lift his gaze, just zooming, working, sweating, grumbling under his breath while his palm slams the stapler, slamming prescription bags to receipts before spinning around to storm from shelves to register, shelves to register, shelves to register, brushing his cowed techs aside, and what this means is don’t even think about approaching his counter, means you just turn around and wait in the car, and when he’s worked his reluctant overtime, when he’s rolled down the metal window cover and locked it, and fled those miserable florescent department

store aisles, and when he gets to the car and tells Mom to get out, tells her to let him drive, tells her to roll down her window, everybody, all the windows, now, because he needs that stale prison air out of his lungs, out of his mind, and you better know better than to speak, or not to speak at least until he or Mom has spoken, because they will, at some point, one of them saying, You're out of the Spirit! and the other answering, Won't give us more than we can handle, huh? Lord won't give us more that we can handle? Jesus, please give us Your peace that passeth understanding....

We obey Mom and don't even think about commenting on that one. We let her drive us home, drive us early, drive us in silent tension while we wait for her to say, "As soon as your father hears about this..." But the stock phrase is never uttered, and then we're in the kitchen. The room's aswelter with trapped Midwestern air. We have a central unit but Mom refuses to invoke it. Such waste. Just because the Lord has blessed us, doesn't mean we abuse our privileges. Instead, Mom fans herself with a paper plate. She looms across from us, phone in fist, doing that green-eye stare. She tells us that, at her request, the school secretary promptly divulged Caleb's home number. "What do you think about that, Mister?"

We don't think about that. We embrace the inconvenience of our bionator, quaff its stale spice. We focus all our energy on the beige receiver in her hand and simultaneously send a million supplications heavenward. May the Calebs be indisposed, may they not hear the ringer, amen.

But, of course, they do. And where did we think our prayers went anyway?

It's a woman on the other end. We hear snips of her tiny sentences. So severely apologetic Mom is to Caleb's mom. But within minutes, Mom's solemnness gives way. Soon the conversation's bouncy. Then it's strictly giggles. Then coos. Smiling, Mom hangs up. Phone back in its rack, she's looming again over us and releasing a thirsty grin.

"What?"

"Hm. Come here, Nathan," she says, and we do. We shuffle after her as she glides to the living room. She arranges herself on the sofa. She pats her hand where we're to sit, but we don't sit. Arms crossed, hands folded into our armpits, we stare, alarmed.

"OK, fine," she says, "you talk. It's OK, I won't judge you."

We remove the bionator. It trails thick juice, reeks of ancient lunches. "They made fun of my glasses, my clothes, my malocclusion—"

Mom claps harshly and we fall silent. We watch her grin widen and widen until she throws her hands high and lets out a girlish scream.

"Halleluiah! Praise God! Guess what, Nathan? These people, these Caleb people, they're God's Old Chosen!"

We know what Old Chosen means, because we are New Chosen, the New Israel, newer because we knew better than the Jews to string-up the Savior. We slip our bionator back in as Mom leans forward, commandeers our forearms. She finds our hands, grips them purple-tight. Like this, she slides off the couch, lowers to the carpet. We are led with her to our knees. Which means now bow the head. We bow the head, drop the lids, and Mom says, "Blessed Father, as Your servants we know nothing happens without reason. Thank You for choosing my son as Your humble witness." Her thumbnails dig

our wrists until we say, “In Your Holy name, Lord.”

Saturday morning, October, day unnaturally hot, sky unnaturally blue and smashed to it so many autumnal maples, smashed to it too many elms and oaks aflame. Mom drives us to Caleb’s eight-bedroom spread. Again we sync-bow, pray. Then she instructs us to use their phone when Caleb’s father’s completely satisfied. We nod. We step from the car the same moment the man steps from his mansion.

He’s a swollen Caleb—same mole, same cheeks, but silver hair. Refusing our handshake, he says, “Follow me.”

A marcher, this one, with his peach Polo tucked tightly over a spare tire, khakis, white leather loafers. We trail Bigger Caleb down the walk and past their four-car garage, but Mom honks. Seems the wagon won’t start. Steam leaks from its faded brown hood. Bigger Caleb looks over, mutters, “Well now.”

The man starts toward her, but we don’t. We see Mom’s eyes close, see her relinquish her forehead to the wheel and raise one hand to Jehovah. This time when she cranks, the engine roars right up and Mom putters quickly away, a billow of white smoke. Bigger Caleb frowns at the dented hatch of our limping Toyota, then he stares back at us. But now his face is clearing. He nods, sees some connection in the car and how we look. “Not just the radiator,” he huffs, and waves his hand in front of his face. “Burning oil bad and your Dad should know.”

Maybe he does and doesn’t care? we think, but don’t say this. Then we remember we don’t have our bionator in. Our jaw, our tongue, they feel orphaned, or opposites, one

so expansive and the other so small, so we blurt, “My Dad’s a pharmacist.”

“Yeah, well how old’s that car?”

“We just bought it.”

“Oh, I see it all now.”

Looping around to the backyard to a gleaming metal shed that opens without a squeak. Everything’s perfectly organized. Each tool we spy has been wiped clean. Bigger Caleb steps in so his broad back’s half-lit. He says—though it seems more to his mass of yard-work trappings than to me—“I would’ve beamed it right back at your rat face.”

“You would?” we say.

“No,” he says, “no, no, no.” Hands in his pockets, he doesn’t turn around. He says, “We should be thanking you, probably.”

“Excuse me?”

“But, we’ll see.”

“OK?”

Directed to do so, we begin weeding the driveway, front walk, side walk, back walk, steps to the back deck, vast patio. It’s past noon before we’re finally mowing. We try to keep the lines even. Then, at some arbitrary point, we take a breather and happen to glance up. Maybe we do so to clean smudged sweat from our glasses, to farmer-blow our nose, but what we find is all five tormentors lined on the back deck and leering. When they see that we see them, they lean into the railing and, in unison, exact a ten-bird flip-off.

We wipe our forehead, wipe the sweaty hands on our chest. To our demonstration of straight nonchalance, one of the bunch is hit with even greater inspiration. He turns around, moons us. The boy jams his buns between two wrought-iron bars, and the others point very near his buttohole. They wiggle their index fingers. *Hey! Look! Thriftstore's house!*

But we are exhausted. We are flattened, rock bottom, could care less. It's freeing, is what. It's a Nineveh beach, so we shrug and yank the mower back to life. We stick to the fence line. The afternoon passing in a two-cycle drone and, at long last, the motor putters empty. Fine, we're done anyway. We are done, and Caleb, and his friends, they've disappeared. We stow our equipment in the shed, lope to the mansion, knock. Bigger Caleb answers, peers out on the lawn and says nothing. Next he brings the remote phone out and also a Sprite. We call Mom. We wait fifteen minutes. We savor the illicit lemon-lime thrill.

"So proud of you, Son! The meek, Nathan, will inherit the earth, and you, today, have been an instrument of The Almighty's divine grace, even, *even* for the very people who continue to roundly shun him. Boy, and did I see that lawn! You did that, Nathan! No way could a professional lawn crew even do what you did!"

Our palms ache, our wrists. Our knuckles are cut, stained green. As blistered fingers rub under our glasses, we say, and quite dryly, "Doesn't, after the Rapture, the Antichrist inherit the earth?"

"I can turn this car right around and take you back. You want that, Nathan? To see

if that poor boy's father has more work?"

We stare out the window, look away. Or try. But now Mom's making noises. We drive three blocks until she's forced to stop the car for laughing too hard.

"Poor boy!" she cries. "Poor boy!" She's cracking up, tears flying. "Poor boy! Ha, ha, ha! Nathan, I said ... I called that Caleb poor, ha! *Poor*. Did you see the size of that house? *House*? Because as a little girl I had ten, Nathan—count 'em—ten malnourished Catholics speaking crummy English drinking bootleg wine and mustard sandwiches on dockworker wages in a crummy three-bedroom house in Tenaflly in Tenaflly in ... in..."

"New Jersey," we say.

"New Jersey!"

Dad's home when we're home, as he's got the day off. He's mowing our front lawn and we suspect loathing it. Wearing flimsy running shorts, he's jogging while pushing the mower. He's doing butt-kicks, high ones. Or he's loathing mowing *in theory*. The man loathes all yard work in theory, and unless it's otherwise justified, he can't do it. But then again, he must. Dad would never pay someone for so easy a task. Therefore, he ensures the action differs from the result; exercise, not maintenance. Mom rolls up along the curb. She leans over us, hollers out our window, "Tom! Thomas Liederbach!"

Dad can't hear. Or won't. He only waves, jogs on. The blinding white skin, the scraggly red beard, six-foot-two, every inch of freckle oozing sweat. So Mom drops a gentle pat on our thigh, says, "Nathan? A favor since I picked you up? Nathan, how about you jump out and tell your father to put his shirt on? He won't listen to me. He thinks I'm

paranoid. But I'm considerate. This is a nice neighborhood, Nathan, so tell him he's going to scare the neighbors. Tell him it means the world to you."

Though we are bushed, though we are sick of grass clippings, we trudge through Dad's mulch and try keeping pace with him. As figured, the man won't slow, won't kill the machine. He shouts, "Slick!" bobbing up and down, "Slick! Hey, how'd the chain-gang treat you?" Before we can reply, he brays wildly at his own joke and trots on, faster. He can't receive our message, and he won't stop mowing, and we know better than to shout anything about propriety, about neighbors—not because of the neighbors overhearing, but because it will simply set Dad off. Just like that and he'll be crowing about keeping those Joneses happy! Keeping your mother happy! Your mother, so worried about The Joneses! The Joneses, so happy with their worry!

Our only option is stepping into the mower's path. We do. Force him to cut the engine. The man keeps bouncing, though, flailing. Arms air-punching, he circles us, circles the mower, jogs a figure-eight, saying, "Come on, Slick, gotta keep the heart-rate rolling! Whatcha need?"

Need? Need. Yes, we think, that's it. Surely the man is thoroughly lathered in the highest SPF lotion available, because, as always, he's prepared. But we've also inherited, from Mom's Balkan blood, not a paucity of manipulation savvy, enough to indicate his chest and declare it an overwrought pink. Dad looks down. "Oh, right you are!" Gravely nodding, he ceases the jogging, but this only instigates knee-dip lunge, the breadth of the lawn, to our front porch.

Immersed in thick shade and Dad's got a gallon of apple cider. He chugs loudly. He smacks his lips and whistles. "Hits the spot!" yelps he, and hands it our way. The jug's mouth, laced with lawn dirt and white spittle, makes us balk, but Dad gestures at it, snorts, "Don't wimp out. Swig it, Slick, it'll make you a—"

But now he points at us. "It'll make you—"

He grimaces, cants his head. He's still pointing. "Oh! Hey, pull my finger, Slick!"

We forgo the cider, retire the jug to the stoop, and wearily say, "Not in the mood, Dad."

"Ah, come on, Buzzkill!" Vindictively, he lifts his leg dog-like and whines out a string of gas. This is followed by a flapping of the running shorts' hems. "Dokey," he says, fluttering the puny fabric, "Dokey, dokey, here's the deal. Slick, I got picked on ten times what you're getting. I went to new schools in New Mexico, California, Virginia, Kentucky, Pennsylvania, Maryland. All the times your granddad moved me around, I hated it. Sure I hated it, but it made me not care, made me an individual. All the neighborhoods, all the kids, near or far, they were all the same, same as this cookie-cutter crud-hole."

He scoops up the cider, guzzles, burps a long punctuation and continues.

"But how'd you think I landed a knock-out like Mom? Most beautiful woman I'd ever seen, and there's me with my skinny legs and crooked teeth. I had no clue! That chick, she was seven years older, had a graduate degree, had social skills and a church full of people who respected her. I'm telling you, Slick, college boys and lawyers and young pastors, they followed her around like fried-eyed puppies. But me, I was barely twenty! How do you think I won her? Huh?"

stone knives, skinning the lot of them, skinning these sinners like boiled-freaking-apples.

Yes, from our Raptured vantage we can see it all: Caleb's chocolate chip mole melting into his sobbing mouth, and beside him, Bigger Caleb, that peach Polo bubbling like overbaked salmon. But then, far too clearly, we spy Amy Lyons. Our dream girl, she's knee-deep in a pool of lava. She's wailing, wailing, staring up at us, reaching out. "Nathan! Nathan! Why have you forsaken me?" What can we do? *How long will she pretend she doesn't know? How long do we have to face the torture of watching her pass up salvation of the Godly love we could grant her in our kiss and prehusbandly touch?*

Then fall truly arrives, overnight. The world goes colder. Things seem to slow. Eventually, Friday dawns and it's a full flip-flop. Halloween weekend impends and so everyone forgets Thriftstore's lawn work fiasco. In their frenzy to establish carousalling plans, we're ignored into white noise, white sight. That's right, for this adolescent coven of affluent heathens there's Satan and Witchcraft to celebrate, there're houses to T-P, and elementary tykes to mug for corn syrup. *Oh Dear Lord*, we repeat in our mind, attempting to make eye-contact with somebody, anybody, *Oh Dear Lord give us not too little where we curse thee, but not too much where we forget thee.*

In a bizarre way, we miss the attention. We've grown comfortable with our overwhelming self-pity, with the constant reminders of our passé attire, our grandpa glasses, our frothing orthodontistry and social awkwardness. In a strange way, we'd felt special, an open wound, but now we're just a scabby phantom. Again.

But wait—Bonanza!

No, we actually do, we say this under our breath at her approach. We say,
“Bonanza, it’s Amy Lyons!”

Seventh period, closing bell, Amy Lyons, she seeks *us* out. A vision of paradise straightaway to our immediate vicinity. She takes us in, head to toe. Her look is one of disgust, admittedly, but, well, we can deal with that.

Wait, disgust? No, maybe terror. “You,” says Amy Lyons, and her voice quakes.
 “Some crazy man’s out for you.”

“My name’s Nathan.”

“I know, *Nathan*.”

We nod. Cast our shoulders a tad wider. We can’t not behold her mouth. How she’s wearing her delicate retainer, how it lightly lisps our name. Irresistible. So much so that when we hold her like this, in our enduring stare, her eyes fill with confused affection. We imagine her out with her friends tonight, their bags teeming with patties peppermint, teeming, but Amy Lyons, alpha female, she’s unable to engage. Can’t stomach the merriment. Can’t indulge in basic sweet-toothing, no, because her mind’s obviously beleaguered over thoughts of our profound loneliness. At home, chin rested on the front windowsill, we watch, we wait, until, somehow, here she is! Amy Lyons our very door and she’s stroking the bell, candy bag out, held agape, and we don’t have to ask about her costume because it’s clear she’s Aslan, Narnia’s golden prince—or princess, Aslana, golden and flowing, the mightiest sister—

“Hey. *Hey!*”

“Huh?”

Amy Lyons squeezing our arm. Amy Lyons shaking us violently. Amy Lyons

saying, “Some crazy man! Running the hallways! A pumpkin on his fucking head!”

It is. Of course it is. Dad. Roaming the school’s front sidewalk. Howling our name and his pumpkin is a hillbilly visage. Evil eyes, gap-tooth grin. Furthermore, he’s wearing a tattered, bright orange blanket. It’s stained with, no doubt, real blood of beef or lamb. The fabric thrashes around him and he stalks the crowds of kids, chanting, “Nathan! Nathan! Bring me Nathan! Nathan! Nathan!”

And they’ve gathered around him in an instant. Our peers, they’re trailing him, so many kids who think we’re dust, or kids we don’t even know, but they’re cheering Dad on, all of them in chorus—*Nathan! Nathan! Nathan!*—so we try ducking back inside, but someone spots us, screams, “It’s him! Nathan is Thriftstore!”

“Hey, Slick!” Dad laughs, jogging to keep up. “Hey, slow down!” He tracks us through the near empty parking lot, pumpkin off, under the arm. “See! See that! What a bunch of sheep!”

Eyes simmering, and without bothering to remove our bionator, we spit the worst words we dare, and then his hand’s gentle on our neck. Then we’re in the car, somehow, and he’s driving us home. But not all the way. He pulls over, says, “Slick?”

“Don’t.”

“You know, you’re right,” he says. “As rain,” he says, and slips his pumpkin on again. Jerking back into traffic, he sticks his globed head out the window. He honks and honks. His Bob Dylan cranked on those blown speakers, he taps the roof in tone-deaf rhythm, and sings, “*It just may be the Devil, or it just may be the Lord, but you’ve got to*

serve somebody!’

We’re stopped at a red light, an elderly couple idling beside us. Dad makes snorting sounds at them, hoots inside his gourd. They burn rubber, speed off. At the next light, Dad clumsily climbs out, gives a deep bow to those behind us. He’s got to hold onto his pumpkin so it doesn’t slide free. There’s a burst of noise, honking, hollering, clapping. Brights flash and engines rev. Someone yells a sequence of brutal cuss words, but Dad just cackles the more, flexes his arms.

We sink lower in our seat, shake our head somewhere between horrified and hallowed, but try not to laugh as he mounts back up, drives on, drives right past our street so he can weave a bustling grocery store parking lot. Cow-eyed shoppers scattering, waddling out of our path like irked livestock, their cart wheels squeaking, flapping.

“Suburbia!” Dad bellows at them. “Suburbia! My wife is in love with Suburbia!”

In the kitchen yet again. Mom’s ordering Dad to remove the pumpkin. “Tom, you’re not setting a Godly example.”

“Soon! Soon!” he cries, and jogs out the front door.

Mom turns to us. “Sit, Nathan,” and we sit so she stands beside us, hugs our head to her belly. “Did I tell you about the woman who took me in? When I was your age? The rich woman who decided I could live with her because I looked so sloppy and malnourished? She had me move right in and my parents didn’t even care. I had my own bedroom that I didn’t have to share with three sisters. I had sandwiches with vegetables. Nathan, new shoes and dresses and friends. Boys asked me to youth dances at a

Methodist church! It was like I was the New Jersey Cinderella.”

“What happened? Why didn’t you stay with her?”

Mom pulls away. She looks at us for a second like she doesn’t recognize us. But then her face lights. She looks to the wall clock and chirps, “Your will be done, Jesus.”

“What?”

“*Shhhh*,” she says, and holds a palm out, up, aimed at the phone. Nothing happens. She clasps her hands, starts in with her special-brand glossolalia, and, within twenty seconds, there’s ringing. Mom’s eyes bulge at us. *GET IT*, she mouths.

Caleb wants to know if we’re available. He refers to us by our actual name and we slip out the bionator that’s suddenly dry. Licking clammy lips, we grunt an affirmative. This triggers a high-pitched and startlingly emotional apology. Caleb is sorry for everything, the gamut, it’s itemized—making fun of our legs, pants, neck, shoes, ears, glasses, hair...

“That thing in your mouth.”

“Your parents are making you do this.”

“*Nathan!*” Mom hisses.

“Yeah, at first, but then I sort of wanted to?”

We say nothing. He says nothing. Hands waving too rapidly to see, Mom’s mouthing, *I’M SORRY, TOO! SAY I’M SORRY, TOO!* but we don’t because we don’t have time before Caleb starts up again.

“Tonight you wanna go to a haunted house with just me ... and, you know, my dad?”

“I’m not allowed.”

“But didn’t your mom...? Didn’t? Um, but she already told us yes?”

We look at Mom, her arms akimbo. Oh so smugly loving that eye she cocks at us.

Inside Bigger Caleb’s car we can’t hear the road. These seats breathe a scent of sweet oil. At the end of our street, the man nods at us in the rearview mirror and soberly proceeds to laud the job we did on their grounds. Then he looks at his son and says, “You should try mowing some time, Caleb.”

Caleb ignores him, flips on KY102. We listen for the commercial about the haunted house to which we’re en route, but after five minutes, still nothing. Caleb switches through the other stations, quickly, then abandons the search. Bigger Caleb starts again.

“So, you have a lot of chores around the house, Nathan?”

“Stop it,” Caleb says.

“Well, Caleb, *your* friends sure don’t. I should keep this one, turn you loose.”

“*Jesus Christ*,” Caleb says, and no one speaks for a while.

We occupy our eyes with the suburbs whizzing by. In the distance, skyscrapers begin to loom. Flat high forms against a flat and dimming sky, and Babel, we think, yes, mankind’s vanity piercing the Heavens but ultimately fruitless....

Yet, we’re excited. Because the only times we’ve been downtown prior were for prayer conventions or to witnesses, like at the huge and ancient, stone nursing homes—taking paper hands, giving those elderlies a last stab. Then we’re thinking of Amy Lyons

again. Amy Lyons out with her friends, her *real* friends, and we're miles from her radar. Suddenly our chest clamps. This whole night feels like a booby-trap—the leather seats, the dashboard lights, the two Calebs silent up front—

We pinch our lids, whisper, *Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me*. Because what would compel Mom to permit our patronizing a haunted house? The woman refuses to call Halloween anything but Harvest Day. The act of candy gathering is not allowed without distinct provisions: A Biblical costume and Trick-or-Tracting. It's an obligatory exchange; we cannot accept Mini Musketeers unless the household, in turn, accepts our pamphlet on the horrors of abortion and the particulars of Judgment Day. *You kidding me, kid? I give you candy and you give me guilt?*

Bless you, Ma'am, but perhaps you only feel guilty because Christ knocks on the door of your heart but you won't let him enter?

Christ knocks you off my porch! Go! Get!

But in the end, retarded. Unequivocally retarded, that haunted house. Everything looking fake, overzealous actors, goofy monsters, not a single, spooky surprise, and over too soon or not soon enough. Yes, on all these gripes we firmly agree with Caleb.

"Well, what now then?" Bigger Caleb mutters, leaning against his polished Jaguar under a piss-yellow street lamp. He's shrugging, hands in his pockets, saying, "What? You guys wanna try another one?"

"Yeah, maybe if we were eight!"

"Yeah, or ten!"

"Yeah!"

So, rather, the man pilots his car to Baskin Robbins. As we lick our cone, he plunks across from us, barely fitting into the bright booth. Hairy arms folded on the chest, a huge, gold watch catching flashes of light, we eye this Bigger Caleb cursorily but can't decide if he's pouting or bored. No matter. We set to the task of licking our scoop into an ornate steeple.

"How about I drop you guys off at a horror movie then?"

"Can't, Sir," we promptly answer, pushing our glasses back up our nose. "Our religion."

Bigger Caleb laughs, hinges toward us. Smiling, he says, "Oh come on!" But his face falls at our stern resolve. "Oh?"

"*Dad*," Caleb says, "just shut up."

Bigger Caleb twists his fancy watch. After a protracted moment, his son begins laughing. It's a low snort, giggling to himself, shaking his head incredulously, and Bigger Caleb says, "What's so stinking funny?"

"Man!" says Caleb, but that's all he says. He only laughs harder, louder. Laughs and bumps his shoulder into ours and it's so affectionate we startle. We bite off our steeple, inflict serious brain-freeze. Caleb presses more, presses and laughs.

"Come on, Caleb, tell us," his father says.

"What your dad did today, Nathan!"

"*You saw him?*"

"No, but I heard! Heard the whole story and that's totally insane!"

“What’d he do?” Bigger Caleb says.

“What’d he do!” says Caleb. “What’d he do! He scared everybody! He was Sleepy Hollow! Goddamnit and I missed it!”

“What’s that mean? Sleepy Hollow?”

Caleb tells it. Somehow he knows everything, knows more than we do. Not only about the pumpkin and the bloodied sheet, about the chanting and the storming the halls, but also about how popular we suddenly are, in the wake. What with a dad so reckless, so anarchic. *No wonder that Thriftstore’s a wild man, no wonder so weird!*

“Nathan! Nathan! Nathan!” Caleb chants. The boy leans in harder and harder, recounting ever more, his shoulder burning ours, burning as easy acquaintance. We fish our bionator from our pocket. Linty, we stuff it in before the grinning begins. But we’re absorbing it, Caleb’s affectionate press, most certainly, but more than that, and more than listening, we’re watching Bigger Caleb. How the man stares over his son’s head. How the man’s stopped fiddling with his watch and lets his jaw slip to the side. How the more excited his son gets, the more the man’s eyes only flatten and haze.

LOOPS



We live on a smoky and fecund parcel of ten acres, live six miles outside of Olympia, Washington. It's a lush peninsula jutting north into Puget Sound, and we occupy a refurbished farmhouse that's forty feet off a long, gray road through the firs.

At first this place seemed haunted by time's juggernaut push, by a constant and sodden reminder of my paper-tiger humanity, but, finally, this month, this week, I'm feeling a newfangled, anxious-like peace flowering within. With it I do not wish to remake the world—no, not anymore—or not like I felt I must do in my early thirties. Not remake it *and* not let it remake me. Rather a desire to work within nature's limits and my own.

2009. March. Michelle and I are wed just beyond one year.



Listen, I don't know what I mean by that: "a desire to work within nature's limits and my own." I often belch these bullshit profundities and they expire even as they're born. All I can do is blush though I'm alone. I think what I mean is this:

Living on such land, its mushy and bloated scent in my sinuses, its feral overgrowth reaching for me, I want to eat forever, never leaving, eating everything, wild berries galore. Want to eat voraciously. Eat them until I puke a Noahide flood—here they

come, surging forth across the land, settling, sinking into the loamed underfooting because they're more than fruit and more than me. Now I can eat our rabid offspring. A globule of the self-recycled. Self smaller and plumper and staining-empowered.



Sadly, however, it is not yet fall, not even summer for three more months.

Fall is the season of berries.

Michelle and I, we're renting this old farmhouse and it heats well. The floors do not creak. We're on ten acres of scraped-gone chicken farm. That's what Cable tells us. Yet there's not one sign of the long-ago bird operation. When Cable bought the land, he fired-up his tractor, dug a massive hole twenty feet deep, and shoved all the remnants of poultry production into the earth. Then he covered it up.



A little mountain town in Colorado is what coup I'd flown. Made for the Northwest. 2005. This after a nasty divorce and a lengthy rebound and after a promising job wasted to not. Skedaddled then, up to Olympia to pitch camp near my older sister.

I won't lie, I wanted to be mothered by her yet again. To be nursed back to older dependence, to some vestige of younger adulthood.



That hole Cable tractor-dug, there's a burial mound left over. It's thirty yards long, twenty wide, matted with blackberry brambles. Fast rabbits occupy the thorny vines. The dogs chase, but their hunts are shallow, pricked short, serving only to slice their muzzles. Defeated, the mutts tromp back inside, get blood on the carpet, on the

bedskirt.



Michelle, her path was opposite mine. She left a viable teaching job that she unquestionably adored, left her cute town on the shores of the Japan Sea. Up and moved away, evacuated her expat life only four years in, even while those Yonago streets were still completely unhaunted to her. And it was a travesty. Or I often think so now. It was my fault. But then I chide myself for condescending her choice. None of my internal arguments change the difficulties she faced. Finding decent employment in Olympia proved almost impossible for her. She's ended up at a diner, cobbling together the worst serving hours they'll give. She's ended up taking a twenty-five grand pay-cut, "But it's not the money," she says. "It's not."



I think maybe Cable didn't consider history and future, just didn't have time to when digging that hole. I think he simply buried everything fast to make the property his own—it's what I would have done. Contaminates, crushed-up cans of chemicals, leaky machinery, all entombed. And now everything's tainted on these acres, soil and water. I wouldn't be surprised if, one day, the rabbits emerge lumbering and cross-eyed and whitely enfanged. They charge the yelping dogs. Their ears are reaper hoods. Behemoth, their gloppy hops shivering all firmament.



It rains and rains.

It has rained since October and it will rain until June.



Cable has plenty of photos from his purchase of the land. In them you can barely spot our farmhouse. Blackberries and maples grown right through the sad-droop shack. And yet, instead of razing it, Cable *tamed the bitch*. That's right, he *patched it to fuck-all*. Not only that, he added our large bedroom with its four-by-six window. All this labor because he didn't have much choice, night and day, trimming and building to keep his mind off his divorce.



It rains, but the rains translate to seed, blossom, pome, drupe. To late season birth, and I try to remember this. I try not to remember that by this fall we may be gone. We may miss the berries altogether.



After reclamation of the farmhouse, he built the Tower. Fifty feet behind the farmhouse and a tad to the south. There he lives, up thirty-five feet, Cable and Sis in the top two stories. We yell out our windows if we have extra dinner or fresh coffee. Yell out if we can't see the dogs for the drizzle and the coyotes are really lighting up in the far back of the property.



Though there is this, too, or more so, in me: beyond my premature berry desires, also a wish—call it an antinomy of the commonsensical—to absolutely fuck my wife like only a thirty-five year old man can. I am recently thirty-five. I am, and I want to *inhabit* this annuity of my ticking away. I want to do so by fucking Michelle diversely and magnanimously and for just the right amount of time. Every time. Below these moss-coated shingles. Beside these uncouth gutters so choked with silt runoff they're sprouting gardens. Fucking and fucking. Then I want these gutter-grown plants to quiver forever in their misty wind, like they're doing right now—quivering their hibernated aphids at the reverberating aftermath of our stropic human coition, its eternal absurdity.



When sex doesn't make us frivolous or sleepy, it makes us somber. We wipe off in silence. We slip on our filthy jeans. In the laundry room, we lurch our feet into rubber boots and head outside to walk the property.

We do this—this walk—at least once, if not three or four times, a day. During the honeymoon months, before we lived on the property, we'd drive out and traipse hand-in-hand, but now it's shoulder-to-shoulder. I'm not panicked by this, am I? How trust operates? Trust, you sluttiest of emotions, O do you not incessantly shift outside to in. Though I can't blame you. No, for if you did not, you'd surely perish in the jealous light of public gaze. Trust, on your hard-scrabble back, writhing, legs lacerating air. Trust grunting at the retarded evolution that made you this ironic creature—form directly in conflict with your obviously-doomed mission.



Then again, hands-free means Michelle and I can be more adamant. We can be grander of voice, greater of gesture. It's how it goes at the start of every walk, lately. How the seriousness of strolling off the seriousness paints our faces. How we're forced to voice that this place, Cable's property, is only wonderful because it's... like ... you know ... well we can't stay here because it's *not ours*.



boots squeaking squishing shuffling wet grass mud patches spit bugs and chocolate-dark slugs over so much goose scat as perfect dark opalescent pellet

Ten acres. Walking, walking, and soon we've all but shirked our adult gravities. From the front acreage to the back acreage. That's the very argument of our strolls, they're inductive. Always around the next tractor-plowed bend, between the moss-bearded apple tree and that dark, low-hemmed Douglas grown through with drops of bleeding holly, and we're back to the great gerbil-wheel movement.



Legs for thought. Only plod as criticism. Keep your eyes high on vapid, Cascadian clouds, high above that tall grove of swaying, skeletal poplar. Don't ask yourself if it's March already. And then maybe it isn't.



Seven dogs from five owners, they walk with us. Some belong to random neighbors, two belong to Sis, two are ours—or we're theirs.

We don't ask, *Hm, what good reason do these canines have to join our strolls?*

Maybe that's exactly why they do. Tag along to scamper, to piss, to halt us in our steps so we're forced to detour while they nibble at their gland-stuffed asses.



Was it Husserl or was it Hazlitt who asked, "Why does a dog lick its own ass?" One second the dogs are gnawing a stick, another they're dominance-humping muzzles and ribs or panting and flopping and leaking that too-white foam from giant smiles. In the next split-second they've frozen. Ears up, tuned *en masse* to some steamy clamor we overevolved primates can't access.

Michelle and I, we won't be left out. We pretend. Swiveling our heads. Flaring our insufficient nostrils. We try to let our ears grow but below us our legs believe they have to keep the ritual.



Before we know it we've walked another fifty feet from the front of the property, away and away from the road, the house, all that strict, human architecture.



Before the property, before Michelle, I occupied one of my sister's rentals. A green duplex in a tidy neighborhood, a five-minute walk from downtown. Then I bought a squat and beaten house only four blocks away. I figured I liked Washington enough to make Olympia my home, and I had to gut the new place first, mostly rebuild it from the joists up. Had to erase from my mind how it looked at the time of purchase, its black fungus, its snot-crusted carpet, its dead mice literally squashed to the walls. The odors

were ungodly. Worse than that sludge at the bottom of a garbage can.



There we go. Here we are. With the dogs, floating once more in contented stasis, around and around the quarter-mile backyard loop. But sometimes we abandon the mowed track. Without talking, one of us just slogs into the far deep marsh and the other follows like a disciple.

Or sometimes we'll wander hard south through the barbwire gaps and heavy mist, right onto Travis' property.

Other times it's a weave of that dim tangent-path into the towering hemlock. Then we're pushing along the choked east fence line, ferns heavy-petting our thighs. Our skin in complete denial, our skin growling, *you've never had a name...*



A family had lived there, in the dump I bought, with their three little kids. As I stripped the place, I pictured the family covered with sores, the whole gaggle so fat, dragging around their doughy pounds like bundles of rank laundry.

Still, I kept at it. Work gloves, mask, goggles, swinging my viscous crowbar. I steeled myself with thoughts of Michelle moving over from Japan, moving in, and it helped. Thoughts of a second shot at marriage. I tore out both bathrooms, gnawed out the kitchen, and behind a scummy pressboard cabinet I found an Applebee's napkin. It had Eminem lyrics misspelled all over it. One line was emphasized, the ink really pinched into the fabric: *I am watever you say I am if I wasnt than why wood you say I am?*



Out of the woods and ferns and our jeans are soaked, our underwear, our cuffs, but we're not even cold! O, the exercise of shirking conditional constructions for the shocking veracity of the senses in empirical conflict—

Listen to me!

Such bullshit!



Look, OK, yes, those first months with Michelle stateside were anything but all giggles and tickles. Mostly we talked of leaving Olympia. Or she did, so I pretended I wanted to, too. And that's a real talent of mine, desire-miming. Though hers wasn't a hate for the place, understand, no, it was an unadmitted distrust with the life I'd told her—told her over and over—that we'd have if she took the plunge, came back to the States...

“You know, because you came back for me.”

“No,” she huffs, frustrated with my inability to listen, “no, I came back for *us*.”



But I'm certain I saw it in her eyes—sometimes still do: a quick-settling distrust with what I assert, and even though she's here. All those perfect pictures I paint of what our love does, could, and should look like if she'd—*she has, she has*—fully commit to Olympia, to my dogs, to making a home with me.



What's the effort of restraint that Buddha spoke of? Why can't I ever get my head around real and noble self-control? I threw out that Applebee's napkin about the time Michelle made it over from Japan, and I thought, brain screechy with Eminem: *Well, that's that, you bald-headed fag, blow me.*



Through thistle and thorn, Michelle leads me today. Her ass in faded jeans looks so strong and candid. Her black hair beaded with rain, garnished with tiny white petals. But though bushwhack as she might, this property is not some vast wilderness. It all returns to the tractor loop, to the path Cable's cut with his snorting Brush Hog, and, Jesus, but isn't this the goddamn doomed logic of roundness as guiding?



Now past the burn pile.

Now past the great Scotchbroom cluster.

Cable's path and its scalped-ease, its *way*, calling us forever to return from our fruitless forays. And always we find ourselves rambling the convenience of his mindless loop—

Now past the single blueberry bush.

Repeat, repeat, and the dogs never question. Unless there's a squirrel. Or a hawk or deer or coyote, and then we don't see them for a while.



But how, also, the fact that it's not our property should serve as a reminder, right? Like, I don't know, a solid clout to easy reason? Pow!—hey, you're still young, still in limbo, all providence in flux. It's OK that something imminent and life-changing is charging down your shared pike once again. Telling ourselves, but there *has* to be, just has to be big luck rolling in soon. Wealth, security, dental insurance, hot tubs. Because are we not mostly attractive and moderately intelligent? Are we not gently agnostic and doers of flow-yoga? Do we not enjoy eclectically cultural and almost-organic cooking? Do we not achieve excessive and shared orgasms? Do we not give to charities if it's simply a matter of adding a dollar at the check-out card-swipe machine? Doesn't this mean, if we're patient, life must open that old toothless mouth? If we're patient, life will show us its cornucopia-throat and gurgle, *Help yourselves...*



Our single blueberry bush, just off from the center of the loop. Here she comes, there she goes, here she comes. How can she be so faint in winter and fainter still in spring, barely noticeable in her field of pale yellow grass? Maybe it's all a dichotomy of clichéd nostalgia—

Man, but when she begins to die, in November! When she burns brighter than the mind can fathom! Foliage an impossibly sacrificial red against berries so super hero blue. Hues of action and I rut at the sight. Yearn for her unceasingly, yearn for more than her berries. I want to shrink-wrap myself over the plant. Absorb her every sensation. Want to confuse her with my wife.

A bush! My wife!

Though does Michelle harbor this fantasy too? Does she hope colors like that burst all over me?

∞

My job is fickle. My job is growing increasingly temporary. Half my colleagues think me rotten, and I'm not being more paranoid than average. Let's say they're not exactly aficionados of my personality-cum-pedagogy. My adjunct courses, though full, keep getting axed at the last second. This started, it seemed, and started so subtly, the minute Michelle arrived from Japan.

And then, when no firm job opportunities panned for her, for that first year together, well our new little household grew more than mildly tense. We aimed our angst at each other. I kept telling her over and over about the Eminem napkin, but I don't think she understand what it meant, why it mattered.

I don't think I did.

∞

But that house, the one I bought, the one we first occupied, even after I'd remodeled it, well the place was a cave. Plus the roof leaked and we couldn't afford a new one. Plus our dogs, in that little yard, were stir-crazy. They gnawed patches in their sides. They fought, gashing each other. I told my sister we were having problems, and her curt response was, "Jesus Christ, why don't you guys learn some patience? Move outside the city, move out here to Cable's place until something opens up—all this acreage will clear your brains."



We rented our remodeled house and moved into Cable's rental. Easier to leave that way, we reckoned. Too faithless to burrow our roots in loose soil, moving to the property was another step toward true exodus. And, two years later we're still in the thick of it—writing grants, applying for teaching gigs, for more graduate degrees, and why does a dog lick its own ass?

"Because it can."

Sure, sure, but then some philosopher had to spout that great grandfather of every trite maxim: "All thought is anthropomorphic."

Said this, and the joke, as some giant, mutant rabbit, loped off into a contaminated dusk.



Or before autumn's dying scorch. In latest summer. When the blueberry bush's thousand frail fingers first fill—hard lime green buds absorbing, core first, soft-centered, but then thriving outward. Soon the plant's pulsing blue with enough fruits to keep our crepes stuffed a good ten weeks. And there I am, in my apron, asking Michelle if she wants more vanilla yogurt on the top.

"Does the pope shit on a bear?" She says, and lasciviously licks her spoon.

"Ten-four," I say.

She licks my spoon. I hers. She, mine.



But first, the harvesting! Bitty delicacies dew-chilled because it's best in the

morning. Fog blanketing the back meadow, clinging low to the loop. Then, after the single blueberry bush is sufficiently ravaged, after the sun breaks through the coniferous branches, we'll forage the scant thimbleberries. Pop off ten or twelve late-season, small red coronas, savor them right there.

Next, greed settles in like a cheeky friend and Michelle and I can't but help ourselves to the sprawling blackberry patches.

∞

How long have we been picking? An hour? Two?

Fingers and faces maroon-smeared sticky and the dogs following in their brilliant mute suit. Crowding in like concert fans, so focused, snatching whatever we'll toss them. Until they grow impatient. Until they get those stout jaws pecking lower clusters and shoots and everyone's so vanished in frantic want that we don't even notice we're stuffed—

—same deal with the thirteen apple trees, how as we pick the dogs begin to leap, plucking their own, shaking the branches, and soon the pack's draped out on parched bunches of clover and crunching crisp flesh and all seven farting a sodden chorus.

∞

I haven't said much about the front of the property, have I? Out our small kitchen window is a cavernous laurel hedge with its black and deadly berries, but beside that, just off our front porch, is an Oregon Bigleaf maple. The thing's trunk is more than fifteen-feet around and there's a knotted rope for scrambling into its story-high palm. Cable said it was always there, the rope, that he didn't install, but I don't care how it happened. All

summer and fall I'll scamper up like a kid, get my slump on.



That tree's got my whole world in its hand and I'm sipping Black Butte porters, reading my favorite stories, fantasizing my future, my heart-champing happily even as I resent how rapt tight I am in the cadence and sway of that goddamn Barry Bonanza Hannah. And in the near distance, Cable drags the front four acres with his tractor.

I pause, look up from the words, sip deeply.

It's tricky to imagine the property wildly overgrown, you know, as past, as *was*, but much of last fall I'd sit in the tree and try, really try. To imagine every inch dejected and weed-run. Or, long before that, as a bona fide poultry farm. Roosters bird-dogging hens. So much squawking just for livelihood's pheromoned sake.



This is important: Sis' heart was snapped, and badly, before she met Cable. She didn't want to fall in love with the guy. Not at all. And so when she started to, four years ago, about the same time I fell for Michelle, she told him goodbye, and he said, "Whoa now." He said, "Shit, you don't know me good enough to go breaking up with me."



I love it when Cable's Brush Hog hits logs. The sound of strength giving into greater strength. The pause before the crunch and reluctant crumble. That limpid return to blade on grass.



In the summer, from the dark of our bedroom, Michelle and I have watched Jess carry massive margaritas out to Cable while he's mowing. Sis'll have back-up too, a Don Julio bottle tucked under her arm. He slows way down and she climbs aboard. Off they go, slaloming the black walnut trees as they flip on the tractor's headlights.

Mow and chug right into the dim.

Every now and then a laugh bursts above the noise of the blades, and it's spooky, lovely, a reason to reorder the everything that's so firm. I imagine for a second that it's no different a sound than if one of them tumbled off, was run under, returned to this place, to what's below us.



Or how, sometimes, more and more, as the rain goes and goes, and if Sis works late, or if they're fighting, Cable comes down from the Tower, lumbers into our kitchen, and plunks his grubby ass at the table. The dogs try to shove onto his lap and he calls them lovers, laughing while they lick inside his mouth. I grab my good tequila, *Clase Azul*, from the freezer. He's going off about my Jess' threatening to move out again. He's telling me she doesn't fucking listen and drinks too much, too often. Tells me she just needs a good ol' down-home spankin'.

Cable's 6'2", 230. He leans back with eyes glinting and the chair groans. Looking around our kitchen, he says, "I should raise the rent on you freeloaders!" and so I slip the lid back on the tequila, and with flourish. He point at it, laughs again, barks, "Foolin'! Foolin'!"



Cable laughs a lot. Laughs like he understands how simple the most complex things are. And, please, I do love his company, yes. Or mostly. But truth-told I feel worthless against the guy. Why, because he's always building—the Tower, fire-pit, cabana, pizza oven, bat-houses, concrete bean-holes. In his shop there's a '59 Fury half-refurbished, and he even built his own 38-foot steel sailboat dubbed The Exit. When summer gusts bend the poplars, he shouts out the Tower window, "Hey, Natester! Let's crank it the fuck up!"



Out past Tugboat Annie's, we motor. Out past Priest Point and Barfoot. When Cable kills the engine and hoists the sheets I try to stay out of his way. Try, but at the same time I want him to tell me to help. He sort of does. Shows me how to read puffs, how to steer by tell-tale, how to keep the rudder loose in my hands because it's not some teenage cock, now is it?

I nod. I try focusing. Try, but there's so much to see and know. Seals popping their heads up, shiny domes glinting like drowned football stars while cormorants skid the surface and a million jellyfish slide mutedly below our bow.

So much to see, to miss.



Tonight our friend Steamer is on The Exit. You know what Steamer claims? That he shoots the jellyfish. That he has since high school. I ask what's the point, and he says, "Spicy." He says, "No not with a gun, you idiots," and tells us he scoops them in

tumblers, dumps in vodka, tosses the tingle right back. Cable says, “You’re so full of it I’m gonna plant a fucking orchard in your mouth.”

“Ha ha ha!” I say.

“Ha ha ha,” Steamer says, shrugging at me. He says, “Fine, think whatever you morons think,” and he rolls his eyes, clams-up.

Steamer looks like Green Day’s Billy Joe Armstrong, but the rocker gone happy and thick with middle-age, gone fish-fed, greener-eyed, so eternally stoned he’s finally content to not sing. Steamer isn’t saying anything else. Soon it’s only the lapping of water on hull, tequila on throat. Then, a good while later, this: “Fine, Cable, but don’t expect me to believe your hype about finding crabs in your eyelashes, man.”

“Tell it! Tell it!”

How Cable describes it is he woke up one morning, way back when, “in them Seventies,” and was brushing his teeth, maybe singing along to *Love Hangover*, when he feels this twitching above his right eye.

“So I rub at it like this and the thing just falls white on my black counter.”

Illustrating, Cable grabs his right wrist with his left hand, holds the right hand palm up and wiggles the fingers like a roly-poly on its back. “I pinch it, lift it up, get a look, and sure enough.”

“Ha, ha, ha!”

“Wait. *No* way,” some other asshole on the boat says. It’s an asshole I recognize but who’s never told a story of his own. This asshole, he says, “No, no, no! Bullshit, Cable! How’d you get *pube* lice in your fuckin’ eyelash?”

Me, Cable, Steamer, we all look at this asshole like he’s a complete asshole. And

I feel safe for that moment.



The back and front parts of Cable's property are divided by a tractor path between two ponds. Our pond is shallow—four feet—but stretches all the way across the property's width, a hundred and fifty yards, where Travis' pond is twice as deep but only thirty yards across. Though they're not actually ponds, but seasonal wetlands, drying completely by October.

Anyway, we're looping the back field again when the rain lets up and Michelle points, says, "My favorite of Issa's haiku."

I say, "What?"

"...Ducks bobbing on the water—

Are they also, tonight,

Hoping to get lucky?"



We often finish our walks by skirting the front acreage, by following the pond's west edge to where it seeps into willows and, deeper from there, into a thicket of paper birch. Sometimes tubby grouse hole-up in the dense grove, or a transient owl. But we do have a full-time red-tailed hawk. Our first month here, it was puny, but now it's the largest I've seen. In May, June, July, wheeling lazily, she plucks garter snakes from the pond path, lifting off as they twitch.



Are we not, in most things, unjust judges of our own actions?

The bird, the serpent, my wife, my cock, my stomach, Cable's tractor-dug tomb.

The dogs, what do they do? They try to kill the snakes. Is it Taoism? Inner nature? It's about security for them, that's all I know. So what do I do but go first across the land bridge. Stomping, shooing, scaring my pale-bellied bubs back to their homes. There's one in particular, dark black with a yellow stripe, that's more than four-feet long. I caught him once. He went limp and smart in my hands. It's no magic, his size, just appetite. Right place at the right time and mouth ajar.



In spring, over the next month or two, Jesus, will the frogs get so loud you can't hear anything else!



And there're newts, too, but I don't know if they're snake food. I do know that an adult newt (or so I've read on a park sign) contains enough poison to kill a thousand field mice. And do we have mice! Before all three of our cats vanished they'd leave tiny carcasses on our stoops. That's right, and bald eagles often drift overhead, but my bet's the coyotes.



We never found the cats' bodies. Never looked in the real thick brush, though. But once, back in the birches, and when the blackberries brambles and thistles were at their height, I heard feline hissing. I stood there picturing Meow-Meow, Bat Child, and Genki, all three gone feral and dreadlocked, still on the property but colonized and independent.



Other days, it takes more imagination. Other days, age thirty-five might as well be seventy. Other days, everything's contaminated, reduced, I hear the freeway's din and the rain turns to sludge-snow. Then, with the snow-flattened underbrush, I can glimpse houses between the bare maples and firs. The people to the east dump old furniture in the woods, and the northern neighbors have a friend squatting in a weathered Airstream. This fuck-nut throws drunken parties and fires his handguns at the coyotes. Mornings after, hung-over, he yells Metallica and, between songs, screams how he hates Indians, Jews, Coons, Italians, Fuckers, Queers, Wops, Liberals, Chinese, Kikes, Himself, God.

I don't have the chutzpah to go over there, explain the difference between *tenor* and *vehicle*.



But digging pitfalls in the woods, I surely fantasize this. Luring that fucker out. Taking his handguns, dismantling them. I need the coyotes, they're my ethos. Around midnight and dawn the pack will light up. They stalk the six-mile length and four-mile breath of our peninsula. Navigating fences and gravel drives, sticking to the dark forest margins; it's a miracle of evolutionary programing. In morning fog I see the beasts and they're grainy, out of focus, always burning off with the sun.

Same with the great blue herons. These birds have that ethereal power—I've seen three at once, in the low-red evening mist of the pond's far side, lined up like the ghosts of old fishing buddies. I want to walk up to them with an extra beer and say, "Where you been?"

And they'll say, "Where you been?"

∞

So what, what else about Cable? He wears shorts even in the damp cold, and a faded Carhartt jacket, and Tevas that show-off his mangled toes. His toenails are avocado green where Sis paints them, and he drives a short, retired school bus to his twenty-plus rental properties. Also he drives it to garage sales, to Budd Lumber for shit-talking with his buddies, to the bar to eat pickled eggs (*someone has to er they'll last forever*).

He was born here in Oly, went to high school here, baptized in Budd Bay. You can't go anywhere without him chatting people up. The guy radiates a confidence rooted in something much larger than singular self. Rich, poor, strangers or friends, he squeezes your neck and leans in. For fuck's sake, then he starts telling his stories.

∞

Up until a few months ago, Cable's dad, when the guy could still drive, frequently dropped by the property. He did so so Cable could show him his latest projects. You'd have to be blind not to see how proud the old man was, how alive he was in his son. But soon, pride or not, as Cable puts it, his father will be "getting the dirt bed."

∞

Cable-isms: "dirt bed" or "pile-drive" or "slabbage" or "pouring the coal." Like when the weather's warm and I'm in the yard grading composition papers, so he hops out of his bus covered in sawdust and waving a hunk of bloody, clearance meat, bellowing, "Get your asshole in gear! I got the slabbage, Nater! That's an order from the Landlord!"

"Be over when I finish these winners."

“Need me to grab my smiley-face stamp?”

“Not these. Maybe a dish of dog-shit and a pack of Q-tips?”



To the dogs, the property’s strictly business, lines piss-clear. In summer, they chase sweeping barn swallows, in the spring, laughing gulls, in the winter, Canada geese. The autumn crows are another story. After the walnuts drop their green flesh, the crows snatch them up, swoop over the road, and plunk them on the asphalt. But they fly just low and slowly enough to keeps the dogs in tow. It’s like they know the property’s all theirs if they can only get the dogs into traffic...



Rushing my comments, I finish up grading. I grab beers and build a fire in the recycled quarry pestle. Cable dumps his concoction in a yard-sale Dutch oven—slabage, jalapenos, carrots, onions, tomatoes, squash. Soon we’re eating with rusty cleavers and tongs, and he’s telling me again the story—my favorite—of his borrowed sander. Or he’ll talk about the property, what he’s building next, horseshoe pits, yeah, or one of those ... what you call them, ampitorium? ... maybe dug in the ground with a nice flagstone stage?

“Amphitheater.”

“Hell yeah, that’s what we’ll build, man!”



Cable says “we”—what *we*’ll build—and I let myself get caught up. Other times, he’ll grow suddenly serious. He can’t understand why his ex-wife won’t come over to the

cabana, hang out with him and their girls, with Sis and me and Michelle. I say that at least she'll talk to him, because my ex wouldn't if her life depended on it. Cable whips out his phone, grinning. "Where's Michelle? Let's have that gorgeous woman bring out the *Clase Azul*!"



Our county road's not busy—that's the problem. It's still, a tempting, three-mile stripe of black. From their city neighborhoods, street-racers pilgrimage, zooming past in one direction, shooting back in the other. Last spring, when the sun showed and we were gulping chardonnay in the front yard—a crotch-rocket screamed by and Michelle tried intercepting him, tried bludgeoning the guy with a bat, but he got past her. It was only a few months after that she landed a position at the community college where I work. But about that same time the economy faltered. Now she's back to serving tables and I'm down to two classes a term.



We walk, discussing our options yet again—Japan? Wales? Utah? Her parents' basement. We're left wordless, standing on the pond path, the dogs circling.



When the seasonal water's high, I think about how it's a waste to not be able to walk out our back door and catch dinner. I'm picturing crappie beds and catfish, largemouth bass in the reed shadows. Soon I'm itching to drive to Long Lake, catch a bucketful of perch, dump them in. But I know, eventually, the ponds disappear.



My favorite, yes, the story of Cable's sander, I should end with that. Because that's the power of the story, to let us believe there's an end, somewhere. Goes like this—though, I'll tell you now, I can never do it justice:

Sis finds this perfect structure, this old house over Capital Lake, for putting in the wine bar she's always dreamed of. So she brings Cable in to do all the contracting work. As he's there every day, he just leaves his tools, instead of hauling them in and out of his school bus, in the basement. But one morning he stomps down the steps and, wouldn't you know it, there're all his tools stacked by the basement door, stacked like cord-wood.

“And I'm confused, right, because I didn't leave them like this. So I go over and spot a note, a handwritten thing there on top of the pile. Turns out it's from the cops. Well, I guess that night before some asshole had broke in and was planning to wheel my tools off in a shopping cart. Got them all ready, got them by the door. But my homeless pal, this crazy drunk I let sleep under the bar's back porch, he sees the intruder and jogs across the street, calls the cops. The boys in blue show up but not very smoothly I guess. No, because the thief slips out, gets into the thick brush, down a vine-hill, gets away.

“So the cops just leave this note asking me if anything's missing, saying to call them if there is. I don't think there is, see, not in a quick glance. Seems the thief had just been ready to load up, seems I got lucky.

“Anyway, I get to work and it's about two hours later when I realize my sander's missing. This really bums me out, but I don't understand it. Of all my tools, I've had this one the longest. Just a monster, this sander, a double-hand commercial job that really roars. She's not quiet either, bucks and jerks, can strip anything—but, like I said, she's

beat to hell, handle all worn-out, just busted-looking.

“What can I do? I keep working, try to forget the sander. Figure it’s not worth calling the cops. Soon I eat lunch, and then, after, I’ve got to go into this little closet, this closet in the deep back of the basement, to get some grout or something. Well, I open the door, yank the light chain, and there’s my sander. But no, it can’t be. My sander’s beat to shit and this thing, same shape, same model, it’s all polished and glistening. The nice wood handle, it’s all cleaned up.

“Well, I lean down and grab it, but she slips slick from my hand. I’m just confused. It’s covered in grease or something. Actually, it’s lotion. See, that’s when it all comes together, what else is in that closet. There’s a big thing of hand lotion and a mirror propped to the wall. Not just that, but some candles all around and a bunch of lady magazines, you know, *Cosmo* and whatnot, spread open to perfume ads. Seems this guy had a whole date with himself. A nice romantic evening sitting on my sander! Me, I’m thinking, *What the fuck?* I want to laugh it off, but this just breaks my heart too, because here, after years of diligent, decent service to me—a good, hard and honest life of duty—my poor old sander has to go through *this*...

“Anyway, you know, I got her cleaned off and I’m still using her. Wait. In fact—yeah, she’s right here in my bus. Yeah, I’ll go grab her so you can hold her if you want!”

A WEAKER SUN

Air rifles aren't the deadliest firearms on earth, but pump one enough and the job gets done. That's Rusty talking. He's saying BBs are for practice alone, for tuna cans pinged off split-rail or mason jars pocked to snap. Well, because, we must save our lead pellets to fell game—magpies, snakes, sucker fish, prairie dogs, most anything small you want to end... except rabbits.

Rusty says *rabbits* and shakes his head. He says, Rabbits won't die from a single pellet, just get stunned. Though this gives us time.

Time? I say.

To run up quick and crush the head. Ball of your foot and twist. Works good, sure, though at the same time it's way too easy.

Easy?

Yeah, he says, too easy for me, and so I use something better—matchsticks.

It's the summer before my seventh grade year. We've just moved here, my family, to this lost and lofty pocket of southwestern Colorado. Lower Castle Mountain, our subdivision's called, and it's northwest of Gunnison, our new town.

Gunnison boasts all of three dust-blown stoplights. Or three and counting. Two more are promised with the fresh construction to the north and east. Wide rumors for extended development, boxy neighborhoods, car lots, strip-malls over so much

foreclosed and cattle-kicked ranchland. A Wal-Mart. A Dairy Queen. Three more gas stations and two more liquor stores for the summer Winnebagos and winter enthusiasts. Fleets of dozers from Denver, people speak of, chugging in to drop all those useless cottonwood groves for riverside real estate. So much mud-pie plowed and folded, acres of pointless purple sage tucked asunder. Same process it took to sculpt Lower Castle Mountain a few years before. Same to build all of Gunnison, Almont, Crested Butte. Same as everything. Same as Rusty.

The kid was birthed in Gunnison's narrow valley, popped out into her sad tourist economy, its boom-bust, and then stuck there all his short life. My family, we'd arrived straight from Midwestern suburbs, a languid Kansas City. We'd had enough of the End Times degradation of the Heartland, so our relocation was early May. But it wasn't till June I met Rusty.

Met, not seen. I'd watched him weeks before, studied the kid out my bedroom window or from that dense shadow of our front porch. Forever he wore the same outfit: navy tie, navy slacks, white short-sleeve button-up. Across hard ground and high grass he stalked those vast fields. All the Lower and Upper Castle Mountain lots not yet contractor-snatched. And he'd even tool sometimes, for ten or fifteen minutes, just a stone's throw from our lounged ranch house. I didn't know what he was doing, only that he was always with his gun.

Little Brigham! Dad joked, meaning what with the outfit and how close we were now to Utah's east line, but Mom said nonsense. Mom said and even if the boy was Latter Day, was cult like that, he still happened to be a Son of the Lord Almighty.

Late morning and Mom got fed up. All my staring, talking to myself. She said, Go on, let your light shine. Said, Oh, but Nathan, wait, and we clenched hands inside the front door. We asked the Father for direction, for pure illumination of my Godly motives.

Your Word, Lord, says two are better than one.

And I added, Yes, Dear Jesus, for they have more reward on their labor.

Mormon? Naw, I'm nothing.

He picked a burr off his frayed tie, added, Naw, I just prefer looking professional, so what of it?

Probably I didn't answer, only shrugged. Probably my eyes were watering too fast in that too much new sun. Gunnison had a light completely opposite Kansas City's, rays you could feel hardening your skin. Shading my gaze, I took in the boy's thin crew-cut, his blond the sort almost white, eyebrows the same. Under it though, his scalp shined rich brown—not tan but so many burned-down freckles and roasted moles. They crowded his jaw, neck, hands. Much bigger, his hands, I noticed, and much more worn than mine.

It's better, naw? he asked. Right? You're already in junior high?

I said, But still it's how popular you are.

He nodded, loaded his gun. Except you find new things out and that's cool?

I told him I guessed, then motioned at his weapon. I said, Hey, I have a BB gun, too.

He frowned at this, and sternly. He pumped the lever and it whooshed smooth,

snapped firm to stock. This, he said solemnly, is an air rifle. BB guns are bullshit, spring-loaded for faggots.

I laughed. I said wait. Wait, yeah, yeah, no, I know that, because mine uses air too.

He raised those see-through brows to eyes sunken blue and suddenly sparkling. No shit? he barked. Well go get it! Two on the job we can ambush anything!

His sharp-whittled matchsticks slowed death, see. A business with the brain glue, and so Rusty carried a pocketful everywhere, had me do the same. Only use them on rabbits, he said, or if we see a fox. Don't waste them on squirrels and smaller shit.

Put it in now?

Naw, just falls out. Always a pellet for the hunt.

My first rabbit took it in the side and flopped over still. My hands shivering, I should've shot her again, but didn't. I had no wherewithal, so she revived, leaped two feet straight up, landed on three legs, and dragged fast under the corner of Rusty's Quonset hut. I moaned a great despair, but Rusty said, Ah, don't sweat it. He clapped my shoulder, dropped a matchstick in the nose of his barrel, and whispered, Shhhh, hear that?

I did. A muffled shrieking. Some blanketed-baby noise. The sound crawled along the spotty grass and up my legs. I whispered, My stupid hands are shaking.

Relax, he said, you can't lose rabbits, for they'll howl till you make them stop.

He walked stiffly toward the noise, and I followed. Over to the old building's concrete corner, where he kneeled. Using his gunstock, he scraped the wounded

creature into the light. Its fur was patchy chocolate, bunched and dirty, but any precise damage I couldn't see. And I'd never been so close to a wild rabbit before. *Scrawny*, I thought, as Rusty flipped it on its other side.

Now it screamed louder. Ratcheted up to full-grown woman scream.

Next time it's all you, he said, watch.

His gun three inches off the ground, parallel so the matchstick wouldn't slip loose, he locked on the animal's right ear. When he fired her lips pulled back to teeth of mean yellow curve. Her screaming went watery, a silver thread of smoke drifting up to me. But I watched Rusty. Hunkered by my knees, his eyes, like he could see the sound, followed it to my face. His mouth tightened, his cheeks burned hot. *Oh, that's it*, he moaned, lids fluttering. *Oh, that's the stuff*.

Eight-thousand feet over sea level and two hundred and fifty miles west of Denver's brown haze, there the Western Colorado skies are an acute blue, a two-dimensional slate for small, brilliant clouds. They float by in loose scraps of lamb wool, and I pinch my eyes here in my office. I smell for sage no longer there, for piss-reek fear and the sweat on Rusty's stained collar. Bodies. The hundreds of things we killed that summer. And most importantly rabbits. Dirt-velvet ribs rattling. Too-big eyes never swiveling, only holding. Then it's me and not Rusty hunched over them. I'm cradling my gun to my chest as some cheap shield. How shocked but so somber I am. How there's no humidity, only muzzled wind. How my profound shadow falls like an eternal curtain, and this keeps the rabbit's eyes dark and damp until I straighten up and they reverse. In full light, they go flat, gray, impossibly dry.

Reaching back in time like this, I burn a split-second fever. Where's the ratio? One meager rabbit, the size of my calf muscle, filling an entire valley with the sound of its end.

Rusty itches his pits. He says, Cry baby, cry.

He's staring up at me, a grin so sharp. Cry baby, cry.

Then he's saying it every time, nudging the wilting creatures with his gun as their sounds dilute. *Cry baby, cry*. But I never say it. Never want more. Maybe more killing, fine—the stalk, the aim, the click of triggered tension and Rusty's hard coolness—fine, but not more of that something emptying out of the rabbits. No, it's too sticky.

We got into a pattern. Roam-hunting all morning, scarfing lunch at my house, and then separating for chores. Most times we'd meet back at his place after dinner. Rusty didn't live in Lower Castle Mountain and its crisp construction, its scaped yards, its tidy irrigation ditches and stocked trout ponds. No, his folks rented the last of outskirt farm plots. Their emaciated two-story sagged besides a beaten green Quonset hut, two sway-back barns, and five rusting semitrailers. Getting there means crossing two unsold lots and navigating three barbed fences. Then I'm balancing over a 2x6 we've dropped across a shallow finger of Ohio Creek. The furtive path steals me from my subdivision's sweet alfalfa and trimmed turf until I'm stomping now through heady swirls of manure reek and pockets of diesel fume, odors leaping free when I step on a tottering ply slab, on twists of tin or rubber, and next having to navigate a dry maze of

collapsed corrals with a fainting sense of home, of my other reality. I skirt a sunken root cellar. I weave these primordial ranch machines. They're weathered into hulking insect husks, obsolete, Apocalyptic. Yes, the End of the World right here, I tell myself. Halleluiah, the Rapture's come and gone, and somehow, despite God's probing gaze, I'm dandy.

Rusty's dad long-hauled, contracted jobs with his own rig, and Rusty's stepmom worked graves at the county hospital. The woman would return home at dawn, slurp boozed juice, and conk until noon. Her radio played forgotten country tunes while a fan fingered her broom-straw hair. I recall her sharp collarbones and her insipid neck hinting its fragile blue. Dead Ostrich, Rusty called her. He didn't bother to whisper it. Dead Ostrich. The couch cushions rose up behind her like velour tombstones, like russet flower epitaphs, and he shot rubber bands at her face. They did nothing.

Anyway, at the same tiny hospital my dad sometimes worked as the pharmacist. It was a part-time thing, and he claimed to barely ever see Ostrich. Not that Dad would right-out say something rude, but when I mentioned her he'd shake his head, tell me, Look, Nathan, it's hard work, nursing. Dealing with hurting people, and, worse, there're a lot of people in this world who want to be sick.

I saw Ostrich awake maybe all of ten times that summer, but only once did she speak to me: Hey you, Steve! No shoes in my house.

It's Nathan, *idiot*, said Rusty.

Oh Nathan, it's idiot, said Ostrich.

And bull-crap, woman—we always wear shoes in here.

Well, I'm changing the rules, boy.

Naw, Dad won't have it.

Steve! yelled the woman, and she jabbed a finger at my shoes. Steve!

I bent over to take them off, but Rusty stopped me. He adjusted his tie and flipped her the bird. We left, but later she ratted to his dad and he got smacked. Bitty slit to the lip was all, or that time. I always got the stories, because Rusty loved to tell them. How, once, he socked his old man back on very top of the head. It swelled Rusty's knuckles, bruised them fat green, but supposedly it made his old man beam sheer pride. Supposedly, the guy bear-hugged him then until Rusty's back popped and then helped him ice the hand.

That's insane, I said, that's just—

Just what? he interrupted. That's animal kingdom, that's what.

Smacking or punching were no part of my household. Galatians instructs not to punish out of wrath or anger, and so Dad gave standard leather-belt spankings. Mom would phone the pharmacy, report our acts of maleficence, and then the man's coming home was this great, queasy anticipation. Inside the front door, he'd remove his white Rx jacket, sit on the couch, close his eyes, and with his hands over his knees he'd count to twenty. No wrath, no anger.

When he stands, my two sisters and I understand. The guilty one follows him into the hall bathroom. He says, Pants down. He says, Hands on the counter, Son.

But I could never fully do it. Couldn't commit to gripping the marble, not while

also meeting my own eyes in the mirror. Straining not to break my echoed stare, not let God win there. But at the expectation of pain my weak flesh flailed, and madly. Blocking blindly with my flinging arms, white welts rising on my fingers, wrists, and elbows.

Or the other times in the bathroom—door secure, fan on, faucet full-bore and the cogs of need greasy in my stomach. Having just returned from Rusty's, my jeans scrunched to the ankles, spit hard in my throat because while he'd shot rubber bands I'd be grabbing rapid-fire looks. Ostrich's starched skirt crimped over open knees. And my office is hot today, but it's misty outside, these windows full of towering cedars. And if I could? Glance up there now? Between Ostrich's thighs so sausaged off vodka, could I recognize anything but pantyhose seams and tired anatomy? Have I completely lost my tremendous imagination?

Imagination to a fault, I thought then. Imagination like a parasite in the gut just gulping the sin I fed it, gulping, swelling. Or all the things I've done to women since. Nameless women. But always me the most nameless—removing my shoes, putting them on. *Steve? Steve?*

And this moment. This absurd act of writing. Scribbling backwards through fake time. Ostrich. Rusty. Both of you were there with me, in the mirror, somehow, when I'd stare myself down like a challenge. And then, somehow, there even more when I'd refuse you, look down at my animal hand, rub the top, flat of my palm, circling, trembling, hop to the tub, urinate. Then I'd have to scrub and scrub and scrub my hands with never enough soap. I didn't yet know there was any greater filth, anything else but

piss.

Late June and there's a sudden disaster. A ground squirrel outbreak like never in history. A glut of horses and cattle are snapping legs in the rodents' holes and shallow tunnels. Rusty and I have chest-straps for our air rifles. We ride our bikes out where the asphalt turns to dirt washboard, where the yards turn to meadows. A squad of two. A special force saving the plagued day. Those local ranchers and rich Upper Castlers paying per every dead prairie dog. Jackpot!

Until we see the cause of our effect. Vice Principle Norris's gorgeous mare is grazing on the distant side of north Upper Castle. It's deep afternoon and she's blindfolded in defense of the fly swarms. But usually when she's blindfolded she's also tethered. For some reason, not today.

What a sight—her sculpted muzzle, her neck teak so long and smooth. Amazing, I'm thinking, how this horse can bubble with that much muscle. And we're leaning on a fence, and we're taking a break from the hunting, and then Rusty says, Check this out.

His BB pegs her haunch. The horse unleashes—snorting, bucking. He does it again, and she stamps and whines. Then I'm stamping, whining, but Rusty says, Ah, relax, BBs can't hurt that thick hide. He says, Naw, only tickles, and pegs her hoof, her belly. She spins backwards. He pegs her ass and she kicks sideways, rips a fart. Soon dirt's flying everywhere and I'm thinking, *Stop, please*, but also I'm mesmerized. My arms loose, trying not to cross them. I'm thinking, I could stop this if I weren't so busy imagining *how* to stop it, what, exactly, to say.

The final BB struck her poll with a wisp of dust and she coughed an old man

cough. She leaped huge, half her height, back arched. In the air, swiveling, she hanked a one-eighty, but gravity pulled harder. It landed her in a dog hole. Sucked down by her own weight, plunged headlong, that front left leg bone, shovel-handle sturdy, taking the force, audibly snapping.

We're hyperventilating. The mare's absolutely still. She's heaped and heavy, a lump of earth. The fracture's lifted her hide like a tent, and now we're climbing the fence. Now we're racing over, but hearing us she snorts and squirms to life. The shattered bone pops into open air as we skid up, sway in place. But she doesn't flail again. Only a small, human sigh and then surrenders her head to the uneven earth.

The sun dissolves behind her great back. The pasture goldens. The distant peaks bleed their alpenglow and we flee what we've done.

Standing on our bike pedals and we're flexing into our handlebars. Pumping harder, harder, away and away. We say nothing. It's over a mile to my driveway where we leap off our bikes, let them fall. We face each other, trembling, but I have to count to a twenty, that's what it takes not to shoot Rusty in his out-of-breath smile.

Carnage, nostalgia. Is imagination the ability to disconnect and stream into the future, or is it an act of futile repair? Making the most difficult and disparate connections, bifurcating the self as you stagger into an unmanageable past?

Bathroom mirror. Dad behind you, full of God's will. Brown belt dangling from his fist as some rank and worthless rabbit carcass. But looking yourself in both eyes is

physically impossible. Not just frustrating, haunting.

Nathan? Are you showering?

Mom's shouting. The son's going cross-eyed. Forgetting why he's in there. He's looking from one eye to the next and he knows he's imperfect, knows the Lord's disappointed he made him this way.

Nathan! Another shower? Wastefulness is a sin! The Ethiopians dying in Africa!

But how many Ethiopians can fit in a bathtub? Is nothing and everything a joke?

None can fit, that's the answer. No Ethiopians because the poor, Godforsaken souls all slide down the drain.

Nathan, I don't think you're showering!

She's right. One hand's rubbing, while the other hand, and even though it's so stupid—even *because* it's so stupid—and because it's so weird, spansks and spansks.

A full week I thought about the horse. Barely eating, barely talking. On my knees begging the Lord's forgiveness. How, God, could I not have stopped Rusty? And how is it *my* job?

A week, but Mom asked no questions. She let me do inside chores, and even when I was done I stayed in. My bedroom curtains closed, I refused the distant sight of Rusty's house. I held still on my bed. I didn't feel like reading, like drawing, like sleeping. Outside, Mom watered her flowerboxes. Every few moments loud slap of hose stream on glass, and then crashing silence.

Rusty must've understood something too, because he patiently waited for me to call.

Norris offered a dollar per prairie dog after his mare had to be euthanized. Anger paying and paying. A buck a dog! Rusty yelped this like he'd fooled the world. I told him to shut it, and he did, but we worked extra hard after that. Him waking me earlier and earlier, setting up shooting schedules, calling ranchers.

Dawn and dusk were the best times, when the vermin slunk out to feed. After killing half a colony, we'd pull our collars over our mouths and kick the carcasses into trash bags. Rusty said his dad told him the rodents had bubonic, the exact same disease from the Dark Ages. I didn't challenge him. Though I didn't get how, one second, the kid could talk like his father was a complete idiot, but then just turn around the next and talk like his old man was some super encyclopedia.

Despite, I listened, and closely. Because back in my Kansas City libraries, yes, I'd devoured Jack London and Sam Gibson, read plenty about the wilderness and hunting, but Rusty'd been born to it, immersed. That, and any mention of pestilence terrified me. Scientific tortures, the Antichrist, what he'd do to Christians missing the Second Coming.

But a buck a dog. It more than covered ammunition.

All there was to eat at Rusty's house was white bread, baloney, and towering shelves of dusty pickled things. At my house Mom built heaving, tumbling fresh-veggie subs on whole wheat hoagies. Rusty draped his dirty tie over his shoulder when Mom had him lead us in prayer. Thing was, he didn't seem to realize he was talking to Jesus. I said, Shut your eyes and imagine you're looking at the Cross. Yeah, head lower.

Good?

Fingers together. Good.

In return for food, Mom expected us to do dishes and vacuum. It embarrassed me, but Rusty didn't cut corners. Only takes a sec, Nathan. Man, move the chairs so I can get under the table. We a team, or what?

Or when Mom fed us too much and we'd had a good morning of killing. When we didn't feel like sprawling in sage, only sitting on my back fence to watch Jolene Welch.

Jolene was a year older, her house twice as big as mine. Rusty called it a mansion, but I corrected him. Mission Hills, back in Kansas City, those houses had indoor pools, I said, and elevators and tennis courts. I claimed I had friends in Mission Hills, even though I never had. I didn't consider it lying, I think, because Rusty liked hearing it so much. Plus, I gave details. How Justin lived next to George Brett. How Jenny's backyard backed up to Russell Stover's, and how Russell, with all his chocolate money, built an outdoor bowling alley and on Halloween you'd bring a bucket and he'd fill to brimming.

Outdoor bowling alley? Rich people are so stupid! Really?

Sure, next to his diving pool.

Rusty asked, I answered, and we stared at Jolene. She had the whole upstairs of her house, had giant television windows for her loft bedroom. A jazz dancer, she thought she was, but we couldn't hear the music. She must've known we watched, but never paid attention. Never took her clothes off, either. Though it seemed like it was always about to happen.

And Lightning! Jolene's dog, a Basset Hound—Lightning! Before she'd dance, she'd let him out. Hearing her sweet voice singing his name—*Lightning, go potty! Go potty, boy!*—we'd howl with laughter. Stupid dog trundling around, our BBs bouncing off his ass as he attempted his pathetic getaways. He'd flop and fold, bite at his back, piss and yap. He'd crash his nose in the grass like he'd been blinded, while his girl, his savior, heard nothing. She was already dancing. Music up, oblivious.

Basset Hounds, Rusty spat, are freaks of science. Only rich people are retards enough to get dogs so worthless.

Yes, a day just like that, one of those languorous and melting late July afternoons. Waiting for Lightning to come out, waiting for Jolene to dance. We perched on the fence, full from my parents' food, and Rusty asked something about Kansas City. I started to answer, but he cut me off.

My dad doesn't want me eating with your Jesus Freak Mom trying to brainwash me.

I had a BB already loaded for Lightning. I pumped my gun twice, hopped off the fence, stepped back and shot Rusty's shin. But he had a new scope for his air rifle, a little one, like on my .22, sure but it worked fine. I made it halfway to my back porch, but he nailed between the shoulder blades. It stung like a wasp and I stopped running. I turned and Rusty strolled to meet me, gun left behind him, hands up in surrender. He said, Naw, man, sorry. That loser, he can't talk, can't even make our bills on time.

I took off my shirt and he tugged up his pant leg. He had more blood, we decided, because I'd hit bone.

The next day I helped Rusty with chores. Stacking firewood, separating aspen and pine. We trimmed hedges, swept the stoop. He mowed while I yanked weeds. It wasn't until after we'd put the mower away that we realized the damage. It was far too deep in the summer for how close he'd mowed, too late in that dry, high world, and so Rusty started screaming.

Fucking shit no! What was I thinking!

He plunked on his butt like a two-year-old, and I said, Come on, it's not that bad.

But it was. He shook his head, picked at the grass. He tore off his tie, said, My dad's back soon and there's jack shit I can do.

Jeez, it's just grass.

He looked up at me, mouth twitching, about to sob. He growled, I'm crying. I'm a baby.

No, I said, you're only mad. I sat down too, picked grass too, but he went inside. I stayed, stared over at Lower Castle Mountain, at my house and the others so new like it. Thick lawns, painted shutters, stands of shivering aspen saplings. An oasis in the drab brown sage hills. I tried picturing it as open pasture, hoof-beaten, dotted with steaming cow patties. Or before that. Buffaloes, Indians, dinosaurs. My Christian school in Kansas City taught that the dinosaurs drowned in Noah's flood. That those floodwaters carved the Grand Canyon, scooped out tons of granite like nothing. Then, when the global baptism receded, everything began again from pairs. One plus one equals three.

Ten minutes, twenty. Rusty didn't return.

He was right, the sun roasted their lawn to bleached scalp. When the wind picked up overnight the whole south side turned scratch and loose dirt. Three days later and I'm standing with Rusty, trying to water it, when his dad arrives. The giant man, black mustache drooping off his lips, shoulders four times the width of my own dad's, springs from his rig with the air breaks still hissing. He runs up, smacking the sides of his shaved head with open palms, and bellowing, JESUS FUCKING CHRIST! WHAT IS THIS?

It echoed. I don't know how. There was no place to bounce sound. The wilted barns, their cartoon-skinny house, but the Lord's name taken in vain managed to echo, get inside, and wake Ostrich.

She stepped onto the concrete stoop.

Sorry whore! Open your goddamn eyes on my boy!

I was certain the woman would cry or shout or hurl the drink in her hand, but she sank to the steps, gazed at the ruined lawn like it hypnotized her.

Say something, woman!

Ostrich lifted her glass in toast. Oh, no, she said, the world's ending and what'll people think?

A tiny terrified laugh squeezed from my mouth, and Rusty hissed, If you're my friend you'll go home right now.

I'd secured a Hunter's Safety card before we moved to Colorado, but, still, Dad never let me shoot my real rifle, my .22, without him. The rule was we had to be out in BLM land, had to follow every precaution by the book. The rule came after Dad's story,

how back in the city he'd been consulting in an ER when paramedics hauled in a kid same age as me. Thing was, if the gun had been a tad more powerful the boy would've been fine, but the .22 bullet only had the strength to enter the ribcage. Inside, it bounced and spun, chewed holes in the kid's guts so he died slowly, painfully, leaked to death.

Fine, but that dead kid was never real to me. Too abstract, too much a mere character in somebody else's story. Or at least up until I shot Jolene. Even before she clutched for her stomach, my belly was lurching. When she whined high and the trigger snapped back into place, my every joint started itching. Flames out to my ears and I was certain I understood then. I set my gun on my bed, and said, You're joking. Really joking good.

Why Jolene was at my house, who knows. Maybe for the same reason Rusty and I roamed hours and acres looking for things to kill. Her chestnut hair was gold-striped from the sun, her eyes big and hazel and bored with everything. She flopped her arms in almost medicated movements and laughed at all the wrong times. But I thought she was perfect. Listening to Whiteheart, Idol Cure, Petra—my favorite Christian rock cassettes. Our backs sweated against the living room speakers and no one was home.

Sun on the carpet. Lemonade in our hands. I stared blatantly. Her raggedly-scissored t-shirt collar. Her black bra strap. Her warm legs glowing in short shorts so that my mind ground against the meat of itself. I couldn't have her slipping away, couldn't have her disappearing with all the *poof*-like mystery that brought her here. So I started a swaggering show-and-tell. Come see my room. Here's my Scout uniform. Here's my skateboard. You ever read *Watership Down*? Wanna feed my fish?

And it didn't matter that she only committed to half a smile. And I could smell her in my room. And I was so close to something I couldn't identify that if only to pause everything, pause her. I levelled my air rifle.

Pastor Rick was there, at the hospital, with a slick-haired cop and my parents and the Welch's. They were snarling, our neighbors, turning around and around, cursing and condemning.

Here's a thought! yelled Mr. Welch. Maybe the kid would learn his lesson if I drilled *him* in belly!

The officer cleared his throat.

Mom prayed under her breath.

What was he thinking? said Mrs. Welch. A gun's *not* a toy!

Bang! shouted Mr. Welch, and he threw his arms up, stomped from the room.

Bang! Bang!

The walls wavered, their color a consuming, tablet blue. Between the conversation's harsh pauses swelled the rumble of earthmovers. Fleets of them in the fields north of the hospital. Acres full of prairie dogs, but it wasn't worth shooting the pests, or even gassing them. Churning their warrens worked fine, packing their mounds, burying whole families alive.

Mr. Welch stepped back in on the doctor's heels. He glared at me until Pastor Rick grasped my hands.

Tom, the doctor said to Dad, wanna see the x-rays?

Dad, on duty at the time, said, What's the situation?

Your sharpshooter's bullet didn't just break the skin, growled Mr. Welch, because it's moving through my baby's bloodstream!

Imagine that! said the cop.

Absurd, said Dad.

You tell that to the judge! Mr. Welch yelled, and his wife began to cry. Mom did too. Mr. Welch put his arm around his wife and said to me, See what you've done, you little shit!

Mom jumped up. She clapped her hands inches from Mr. Welch's nose. Buddy, I am a Christian woman! Watch your filthy mouth! You're a sinner like the rest of us!

Confused, Mr. Welch batted his eyes, but Mom wasn't done. She leaned closer, lips curling back to white, white teeth. What you called my son, *mister*? Well the mouth speaks what the heart is full of.

Matthew 12:34? Luke 6:45? I couldn't remember, can't. Pastor Rick released my hands and stepped over to lower Mom's. When he escorted her outside, I left too. Or my body slipped into numb. Into the dread that doesn't give or stretch but simply snaps and you can see from one end of your life to the other as if it were an empty room. Oh boy, the doctor's saying, we can't figure it out. The pellet's lead, clear as day. First it's in her abdomen, but now it's in her right thigh.

Ostrich wasn't fired for failing to remove Jolene's clothes during the x-rays. She wasn't fired for pulling the girl's shorts down an inch each time she snapped a frame. She wasn't fired when the pellet tumbled from the waistband folds, tapping across the

tile. Rather, it's Dad's big German-Irish nose that smelled vodka steaming from her pores as he guided her aside and asked, Been drinking?

She blinked, eyes dull and lightless, but then her voice so sweet: What's new, Good-looking?

When the cop asked her, she said the same thing. And I can still picture the sobriety test, though I don't know how, or if it was even her. How could it have been? Didn't she work night shifts? But here she comes, down the brightly lit hospital hallway, between beds and IV racks, her stagger, her cuffed hands, her face lifted and lids shut to that fan's breeze and that forgotten music.

Jolene was fine. One or two pumps, that's all the power it had. I'd only wanted to surprise her with a hiss of air, but I'd forgotten I'd loaded a pellet earlier that day. Still, I had to sell both guns because they meant something different suddenly. Also, I had to pay for Jolene's already cut-up t-shirt and the mistaken x-rays.

In October, the day she got her learner's permit, she accidentally backed over Lightning, and her family moved to Denver soon after. As for me, home from the hospital, I was spanked for the last time. I caught Dad's gaze in the mirror and he landed one weak swing, dropped the belt. He told me I was too old, pull up my pants, go to my room and just think hard about *why*.

As for me and Rusty, we never again spoke. Someone told me they heard he'd been held back, had to repeat sixth grade. I don't even know if he bothered going to school that fall, only that he continued to stalk the pastures beyond Lower Castle Mountain. Silhouetted in a weaker sun, he used a .20 gauge now. The barrel jutted from

his shoulder like another limb. No matchsticks needed. When the shotgun's resound shook our valley I'd think of the scripture about men putting away childish things.

WHAT'S HE GOT?

You have not seen your wife in a long, long time. Not Odysseus-long, not even close, though tender-long, unquestionably. Say two months. But she's flying home, and soon, from that other continent. In preparation you groom thoroughly. Beyond haircut, beard trim, fingernail prune, and the comprehensive smearing of nonallergenic lotions and Liz Claiborne for Men, you sheer that magical wool of the crotch. Soon. White and black hairs indiscriminately tumble to the champing of electric shaver. Soon, there will be lust. Soon, frantic and convulsive foreplay.

Foot on toilet seat, knee cocked at ninety, you draw this five-bladed razor, this F5 Phantom, this razor named after your favorite childhood fighter jet, along the yanked-taut chicken skin of your scrotum. Like smooth jazz. Like irresistible. But hair half-cleared, you're confronted with a blatant seam. Runs the full center of your sack. No matter how swollen, overgrown or sagged with summer heat, this ominous scar tissue remains a reminder that said proud testes once cowered ovary-like in your body, that this weighty sac is nothing more than hyperbolized labia glued with testosterone.

Do you give up? Do you retire the razor, rinse clean the Claiborne? No. You press on. You remind yourself of Jesus' declaration in the Gospel of Matthew. "For what is a man, what has he got? If not himself, then he has naught." That's the spirit! Press on, good sir, press on! Humming now. Whistle while you work and the everlasting Protestant ethic. Mary Poppins' controlled hand on your scrawny nape.

After the sugar, the spoon tastes extra metallic. But still we finish the job. Finish, no matter how menial, no matter the frustration, the obstacles, this flaccid cock pushing into the way like a dog wanting petting. And how's about a little Sinatra? Old Blue Eyes, that should lighten the unspent load, keep things delineated, goal-orientated...

Fingers snapping, women swooning. Ah baby yes, and after the show, me and Sammy DJ-to-the-R and the King of Cool, we'll eat 'em up, spit 'em out. Show these skirts how to squirt. Though for now just croon, doll, croon. *For what is a man? What is a man and how is he full if he shall gain the whole world and lose his soul?*

Whoa. Whoa boy—

Shouldn't have gotten carried away. Shouldn't have shaved part of the leg, too. For now, in the heat, a friction. A painful chaffing. With no fibrous buffer, the ballsac dominates that inner thigh. A blight of quick blisters. Two, great, mirrored rashes. Aloe only burns. And your cortisone cream's expired, flakes. Walking on the outsides of your feet. The sky is falling in a net of black clouds because, to top it all off, your wife gets home but the dogs get sick.

One dog pisses in her sleep. The other swallows stones. In the night, a single wet cough and a smooth clatter on the slate floor. Head right to the vet. This fauna-doc, she's your same age but with a little girl's body and your wife's same name. Except where your wife has freckles, this woman has hundreds of teeny moles. When she smiles, they shift like loose spice. In the exam room, she squeaks, "It's excitement, that's what I'm thinking, change. They're just like us, their nerves, they can overdo it."

She escorts Paige away for a urine sample. Roya, the other, tail tucked, does a quick tour of the space. Whining the separation, she claws onto your lap, shivers and you rub her belly. You're imagining pebbles slipping down her throat. Thinking cool, indigestible orbs. Ear to her neck and you're listening for clicking. Until your fingers graze her nipples.

Remarkable—how much longer they are than Paige's. Because Paige was nurtured through puppyhood, coddled, regularly fed. Not Roya. Seven years later, Roya still must down a pound of food in a minute, still howl at unfamiliar furniture. When you adopted her at eleven months, she'd been discarded four times. It's what the Humane Society counted. Though they'd spayed her in time—they assured you—so she never birthed. And you're all for spaying. But.

But, well, it's got to do a number, right? Think. Twelve and thirteen year old girls, human girls, they menstruate. Nature going, Hey you!—in no uncertain terms—Hey, you're a woman now and this body belongs to something greater. No pill or tampon can reverse such knowledge. No sexy undies can catch so much blood. Center of the body opening, burping excess and unused tissue. Or how years ago you had that friend—this was high school—and this friend was so skinny she didn't have a period until she stopped running track at age eighteen.

You don't know how that fits, but you're thinking about her now, while sitting in this exam room, thinking about your pastor's dreamy daughter. It was your junior year. She talked about her stalled menses and she said it didn't bother her. You both were outside, after practice, alone. Her tiny running shorts and in the afternoon distance great mountains that slept and over them clouds like fish leaped for the sun and in the

wind was the smell of a perfect moment. Instead of listening, you tried laying one on her. Maybe you only told her you wanted to. But she was on a train of thought and didn't pause. Girl turned the other cheek, said cheerily, "I don't want it, you know? My period? Without it I can focus on track, on school? You know? Focus on the way my muscles work?"

Roya's licking your face, the corners of your mouth, slagging for last bits of your breakfast. She has the fresh breath, Paige has the sour. Paige catches things, brings them back, drops them at your feet. Not Roya. Roya hoards, gnaws, guards. Would they be this way as mothers, with their litters? You'll never know. And if you think about it too long you'll get wildly depressed. Oh yes, it gets bad. Just last night it got bad. After dinner, celebration dinner, homecoming dinner, eyes full of Penelope and Odysseus, you and your wife had much fine merlot and unexpectedly lost the clothes. Had the kind of grips on the other you can't leave and easily reclaim. Then crash-landing in the bedroom. Then underpants tugging. Oh, but the dogs were in there already. Putting them out meant breaking away. Though pets watching you screw, well you've never relished this. Oh, let's get that straight. But last night was an exception. Meaning, you wanted it to be an exception, which made it worse. Beyond normal discomfort, the feelings from their puppy stares. *How terribly, terribly depressing*, you found yourself thinking. Thrusting and thrusting past sharp pains of thigh rash, but still you're thinking, *How sad. How sad having to witness this act of mimed procreation though never know it for one's self.*

For what other purposes are there for female dogs—especially working dogs,

Border Collies—but herding, hunting, nurturing young? No wonder the sleep-pissing. No wonder the swallowing rocks. There you were, pressed to your wife’s wondrously yearning skin, but suddenly lost in the concern that watching you moan and stab was filling the dogs with vast pointlessness. It wasn’t an option. You broke down, put them out, all along hissing, *Hold on, please! Hold on just a sec...*

But back on the bed your wife, still smelling humid and ripe with foreign lands, well she only smiled, said, “You. You. Oh, you,” and slunk under the covers. She fluffed her pillow, batted her eyes, muttered, “Next time.”

MURFREESBORO

This is not a ghost story. I have ghost stories. But this is so much more.

I was nineteen, delivering soggy pizzas in a shitville called Murfreesboro. Now, if you've heard of the place, if the town is, in fact, dear to you, be assured that my tale will serve only to calcify your notion: I'm an egocentric douche canoe. It's a notion I won't disagree with. Or I *was* one. A complete human catastrophe. As are most nineteen year old American juvi-males. On the other hand, if you *haven't* heard of Murfreesboro, look, Scout's Honor: it's a squat, rueful berg on the southern outskirts of Nashville and I'm never returning, not even to stop for irritable bowels.

But touché, I did say *outskirts*. Which smells of the frisky and blithe. Like some semipastoral delight. Rolling blue meadows, cottonball clouds. No. Bad. When I graced the place in '93 it was somber and marginalized. From daybreak on the sun not but a hot smear and when she set, always a dirge. When she set, even less relief. Every night a rotten fog swept in over the Hardees, the acres of RV lots, the four frat houses blasting their Spin Doctors, their Soul Asylum. And that was it. That was Murfreesboro.

From the majestic mountains of western Colorado, I'd emigrated. From elk bugle, and snow-stuck pickup. From aspen quake and ditch weed hard-sucked out crushed Keystone cans. From two-seater ski lifts bouncing through huge powder storms. Western Colorado. What I held to be *real* Colorado. But I evacuated for a number of vapid reasons. The most primary being that my older sister said we'd be smack in the heart of

Music City. Like hip and swanky, she'd said. Said my nights would abound with patio bars, blues guitars, and desperate cowgirls frantic to corral me, break me, cast me into twangy seas.

Fueled by such musky visions, I puttered across the Midwest. Guzzling coffee. Only stopping for gas. Though even as I pulled into Murfreesboro I knew I'd been egregiously had. Compared to our cowtown back home, Nashville was divine, but also way too expensive. Further, Nashville's suburbs were way too expensive. Instead Jess had found us a concrete apartment thirty minutes off-course, and before I could even knock on my new door Sis shuffled down the cracked walk saying, "Oh, stop bitching. When you want to party, find some ho in Nashville and just crash at her pad."

Within a month, my sister proved prescient. Most nights I spent in Nashville, and once in the city, I didn't pay a dime. A Déjà Vu showgirl, an ex-army lieutenant, stage name Tamara, spotted me in a Wendy's and we hooked up. Or "hooked up" implies too much mutuality. No, she had five years on me and scared my very soul, but was a sure fit for my imagined persona. Slinking into that neon-throbbing titty club, I'd wait for her shift to end. Every few minutes she'd strut past my sticky table, run a hand through my hair. I'd smile but not look up. Just stare down at my five-dollar Sprite because I couldn't look at her under those swimming lights—her ass cheeks bruised and pocked. Also, her crotch. It was completely shaved, but never well, the spiky flesh grayish-purple, deaden.

After her shifts, she'd shower. The first few weeks, I'd eat her in my car, in the club lot. There was an onus to it, like marking complicated territory. Her scruff hurt my lips, left me tender. That's graphic, probably too much information. But it's the bigger concept I'm trying to convey. It was all a bigger concept, and at nineteen I was deaf,

dumb, and blinkless. Tamara and I, we dyed our hair jet-black, wore vinyl jackets, and burned all her tips on hotel suites, blow, and Maker's Mark. Sprawling on spotless beds, the curtains wide to a Nashville skyline, we devoured bag after bag of Wendy's and never used condoms.

"Doesn't matter anyway as mine's a corpse pussy." She liked saying this. "Yup, barren from two abortions and a raping uncle."

Then there was her strict code of monogamy, she explained, that allowed her to be a Catholic *and* a stripper. But I knew she was lying. I liked that about her. She could look right at me and recreate herself to fit my changing expressions. So I went to her. Every chance I got.

Anyway, the particular night I want to tell you about, it happened after I'd been in Murfreesboro three months. Domino's Pizza had taken me into their employ. They clothed me in opulent blue, promised me more shifts than I could dream. Best of all, the shop was only two blocks from our apartment. I'd average forty bucks a shift. Kept me happy, as I only needed cash for rent and the gas tanks to Tamara.

Behind Domino's was a bench where I relaxed when shifts were slow. I'd read Brautigan, Bukowski, Camus. I liked what they said, but didn't buy a word. Three more brave idiots trading their eternities to flip off their Creator. Who didn't want to? I did, of course I did, but at least I had the brains to know that the minute Death showed I'd scream the clemency of Jesus' holy name.

Outside, reading. With a pen. I'd underline passages, shake my head. I made certain to laugh loudly enough for my coworkers to hear. Those morons had acorn minds,

no great destiny, but I told myself that I preferred them to a university full of sponge-brained sheep. The first week I'd arrived in Murfreesboro, I told my sister I was registering for classes, but instead found myself strutting around the student center in an anxious daze. Compared to my freshman year at my hometown's tiny college, Middle Tennessee State's campus was monstrous. I felt anonymous and plain. It wasn't that I didn't want to study, I did, but *abroad*. That's how I'd say it all the time—*abroad*. Though I had no clue what it entailed. Again, the concept: people back home picturing me sketching nudes in Florence, reading Joyce in some smoky Dublin pub.

Truth was I could only sketch nudes off photographs and I only knew James Joyce by that alliterated name. So there's another reason I was in Tennessee; anywhere else I would've truly had to go it alone, but since Jess had already smoothed the path...

Further, my few friends back home had no clue where I'd gone, just that I had the balls to pack up, drive off. East, I'd told them, and from there, well flights to Europe cost nothing. Except when I went to register at the university, register because my transfer had been accepted, because my parents had lent me money and expected college from me, I found I could only stand outside the student center trying to appear original, defiant.

Instead, I felt invisible, anonymous. I had home-pierced ears and oversized motorcycle boots. I had electric blue contacts, silver rings and bangles. But so did everyone, hundreds of guys swarming around looking much more stylishly enigmatic than I. In response, I wilted. Produced my pipe, loaded some weed, posed. Hordes of registered students filtered past, sniffing. Some frowned but others flashed hang-loose signs. I didn't know these people but their affirmation of my rebellion was enough. Instead of classes, I was obviously meant for archetypal statements of artistic rebellion. I

propped a boot on a short, concrete wall, rested an elbow on my thigh. I stared Zen-ly into the distance until, at some point, a beautiful girl, pens and paintbrushes twisted in her hair, stood next to me. She said nothing, so I dished her a bandit smile, and she returned it. “You know,” she said, voice of a mother comforting her skinned-up child, “we all smell it, but that’s not very intelligent, now is it?”

I stared her down. I held my smile. Wracked my brain for some witty comeback, but then she was leaving. How great would that be, I thought, if Security showed up right now? Couple of fat Confederate hicks trying to tackle me? I’d been a track star since junior high, hurdles, middle-distance. I could run a quarter-mile in fifty seconds. I’d zip past that bitch so fast the paintbrushes would fly from her hair.

That night. That particular night. September.

Classes had started at MTSU, started without me, but the campus, typically buzzing, was unusually slow. I didn’t mind the slack. I read, underlined. Gathered the dumb gawks of my coworkers. Then a big order came in at dusk. No one wanted it. Running four pies eleven miles out to the edge of the delivery area. So I said fine. Fine, but then I’m calling it quits for the night.

Pizzas in my backseat, music up, windows down, I aimed my old Toyota wagon for BFE. Murfreesboro, the town, look, maybe *it* wasn’t so bad, maybe *it* wasn’t so boondocks, but it was sure guilty by association. Past the city limits, everything flopped. Woods took over. Mobile homes sank. Sidewalks dove. All asphalt turned to weed-tufted paths lined with rusty barbwire and dead-ending in rubbish-strewn hollows. It wasn’t naturally wild, understand, but feral and ailing. A worn, ambushed aura. For centuries

people struggled to live here in some bitter cycle of ignorant use, destroying their livelihoods, and so the nature on these properties, when it revived, sprouted thorny and jaded. My Colorado hometown—Gunnison—was the sticks, but it was wild, pristine, its outskirts National Forest and BLM land. Wholesome mountains, clear trout streams. The land I passed beyond Murfreesboro, sure, I know now that it has its own weary beauty, but at that age I couldn't see it, couldn't see past my idea of the inhabitants as genetic defeatists, the sons and daughters of brooding racists, incestuous, hyperunwise.

Pine forests and dark basins where abandoned pickups stewed in ponds. I knew these lands were checkered with lost Civil War battlefields, but I didn't know how to feel anything about it but aversion. An older guy I worked with spent his weekends bushwhacking thickets. Armed with machete and burlap sack, he'd unearth cannonballs, uniform fabric. He got so excited he was almost crying one night. Said he found a femur with an imbedded bit of iron grapeshot. I was outside with my book and he wouldn't leave me alone. None of that war crap interested me. Or, no, that's not entirely true. The dude's emotion did. His passion. It was like Dad's, a gushing wonder, and at that point in life I was terrified to wonder. Associated it with naivety, with a lack of confidence or resolve. And then there was the sense of competition. I could only see the world as measured against me, my existence dependent on my individuality. Right? I had to prove myself as not my dad, but yet greater than him. He'd always wanted to be a philosopher, an adventurer, but he'd given up, given in, went to pharmacy school, everyday counting pills with gritted teeth...

Still, though, sometimes I'd imagine, while out on a delivery in those sad woods beyond Murfreesboro—and I was imagining it this particular night—Dad coming to visit.

I could picture us perfectly, not talking, but working side-by-side, machetes and spades, sweating, grinning, digging up cannons and blood-rusty bayonets.

Fifteen minutes driving and my crude highway shot out from of a low, tangled marshland, shot out from the shadows, and suddenly to my left stretched an odd expanse of bluegrass sod. It was as sculpted as a golf course. Its aesthetics caught me in the chest. Without thinking, I eased off the gas to soak it in. My arm out the window, a cool scent of dew and alfalfa.

Obviously it was the future site for a cluster of cookie-cutter homes. The developer had already paved a road, a wide, black stream looping out into all that lush. But that was it, no other progress. No lot flags, electric meters. Nope, just one single house at the far end, a tall, pink number with a green roof and white trim.

At the road's entrance stood one of those landscaped hillocks with a fancy sign. I don't recall the place's name, but it was the subdivision on my ticket. Around the sign were floodlights, manicured hedges, jagged half-buried boulders. I drove in as the day dwindled just beyond the pink house. A soft-orange sun melted into a row of dark oaks. The developer had poured sidewalks on both sides, white concrete and bright curbs. I cut the volume on my stereo and coasted. Under my old tires the fresh black asphalt babbled.

The driveway to the pink house was the same bright white concrete as the curbs. I tossed my car in neutral, wrenched the e-brake. The pizzas were divided into two bags. These big insulated sleeves with plastic pouches on the front for the ticket order. Like always, I checked the bill again before heading up.

I rang the doorbell, waited. A good two minutes. Nothing happened. The porch

had been recently coated, and I could smell the pitch and varnish. Could feel it tacky on my soles. Again, I rang the bell. This was long before cell phones were common, '93, so I couldn't do anything but sigh and lug the pizzas back to my car.

I honked my horn a few times. I wasn't even annoyed, only playful. Maybe it was the sod, the unusually cool evening, but I felt sedated even though I hadn't smoked anything yet. Not a big deal. Besides, I was paid an hourly wage and reimbursed for mileage. I had no plans for after my shift, either. If earlier I'd been thinking about seeing Tamara, driving into Nashville, at this point I'd decided against it. No, I'd just go home, drink a few beers, cook a burger, challenge my eleven-year-old neighbor to Scrabble. Besides, everything aside, I had no good reason to stay in Tennessee. It was getting more apparent every day, but even though in my heart I wanted to return to Gunnison, return so badly, my pride wouldn't hear it. So I guess I was waiting. Like if I held out long enough, if I stayed low and didn't make too much noise, all the big, hollow words I'd left back in Colorado would slowly grow into themselves.

Backing out of the drive, I shoved my car in first, but pulling away I caught movement in my periphery. From the open front door, a man waved. He waved with both arms. He looked middle-age, well put-together, bright glasses, combed hair, nice, light-blue Oxford. Giving him a salute, I reversed back past his drive and pulled on in again. I hopped out, grabbed the pies, and skipped to the front door only to find he'd closed it.

Not a crack. I rang the bell and waited twenty seconds before pounding. I even shouted a bit and put my ear to the door. Then stormed back to my car. Flinging the pizza bags in the passenger seat, once again I backed out, but this time I stopped at the end of

the drive. Squinting up through the watery blue glass along the top of my windshield, up above the pink garage, standing there, staring down at me, framed in a shadow-dimmed picture window, was the man I'd seen. He wasn't alone. Beside him stood a woman in a long dark dress and, next to her, two boys and a girl. The family wasn't laughing, wasn't doing anything. I raised my hands like, *Hey, what the hell?* Did they think I'd leave the pizzas on the porch?

I checked the ticket again. There was no name and it wasn't a prepay. I climbed out, pointed to the front door. The only one to make a move was the tallest kid. He nudged his brother, and the brother nudged him back. The mom looked over at them and said something, and the boys stopped horsing around.

Blowing them all a kiss, I jumped in my car. I dropped the gas pedal, revved the engine, and popped the clutch. My front wheels peeled out, jerked me backwards, left streaks on their fresh concrete.

Real funny, real fucking funny. I loaded a bowl, smoked my pipe on the way back. Pulling to the side of the road, I ate one of their pizza slices. Then another. I started to feel sick. I prayed. I was still praying at this point, the barest affectation, talking to Jesus brashly, aloud. There was no one else I could talk to about God, about spiritual matters, about guilt. I knew everything my parents thought, all the scriptures they used. Jess, she couldn't care less one way or the other. When I'd say guilt, she'd tell me to get over it. That pretty much ends a conversation. If I talked to Tamara about God, about guilt or shame, she'd tell me I was thinking too much. If we were high, she'd lose her temper, swing pool cues at my head. More than once she had her enormous bouncer friends

confiscate my fake ID, punch me in the gut, drag me from a club. But she always came rushing out, mascara dripping, hands and pockets full of cash, bumps, handing back my ID and asking forgiveness. Next, she'd lick my neck right there, on a busy sidewalk, grinding on me in front of scowling tourists. She'd whisper how sexy I was, how she loved my body, my skinny legs. David Bowie legs, that's what she called them. Or Sir Lawrence Olivier legs. And only with her did I not wear my long-johns—

Christ, the long-johns! The things you forget. Just the thought, now, twenty years later, makes my ears burn. This was a gimmick I'd used since high school, under my jeans, trying to make my legs look stronger, my ass more muscular. Even that summer, in the Southern heat, I wore them. I could get away with it in the bitter Gunnison winter, but in the new humidity my thighs boiled with ingrown hairs.

The prayer apparently worked. *Jesus, please make my stomach feel better.* I drove on, the ache vanishing. Got my thoughts back to that asshole family in the neat pink house. I decided they couldn't screw with me unless I let them. Nobody could. And back at headquarters, I told the other drivers my story. We were clustered in the stockroom where you fold the pizza boxes, four or five of us reeking of grease and leaning on cool, steel prep tables. I thought they'd laugh at my tale, or at least shake their heads, call it a lame stunt, but instead they stared at me. "Whoa. Whoa." Stricken, all of them, no different than the damn family in the window.

I hissed, "Admit it, was that not the most fucked prank ever? A whole family messing with me? And not a bunch of white trash, either—why?"

The Civil War guy, his round glasses and snarled beard, set down his half-folded

pizza box. He shook his head, very slowly. “That’s straight terrifying, boy. Whole story. Gives me the shivers.”

“Come on! Come fucking on!” I laughed. I huffed. But suddenly the guy was right and my insides went hard. My fingers felt loose and cold.

Handing over the order slip for the four pies, I asked my manager if I could go. She frowned, rubbed at her lips. She’d gotten a call, she said, about twenty minutes back, concerning this delivery. “The man told me that you never showed, but—”

“Are you goddamn kidding—”

“Hey, hey now, Nate, hold on. No need to get all bent out of shape. I checked out the ticket, and, then, see I found I’ve got a note on my desk, right here, saying this has happened before, saying not to deliver out to that subdivision. So, it’s not on your shoulders. All my fault.”

At home I had that acid ache in the legs. That feeling like I had to keep moving my arms, keep popping my knuckles. I rolled a joint but didn’t smoke it. I was scared, scared I’d go suddenly crazy, climb up on the apartment roof, throw myself off. I needed to tell Jess my story, but she wasn’t home. She had a life in Murfreesboro, friends that were kind to me, always welcoming, but I couldn’t seem to click with them.

I went into my sister’s room, sat on her bed. I knew what she’d say. She and Dad, they were the logical ones, knew how to measure the world with reason. Instead I picked up Jess’ bedside phone, called Mom. The first thing she said was she’d been praying for me, said the Lord had me on her mind.

“He’s got his angels all around you, Nathan, but they need *you* to believe, not

me.” Like always, rote scripture. Like always, floored me. I said something that I knew would make her hang up—probably Jesus’ name in vain—and she did.

With that dead-line buzz in my hand, I almost called Tamara. But I didn’t because I realized then I was just one of her many. All those bouncers, those guys at the club, I could see her peeling off their condoms, could hear her cooing, *You don’t need this...* Tossed onto a giant pile of Wendy’s debris.

Instead, and reluctantly, I dialed my girlfriend back home. Actually, that summer Chelsea was at her parent’s house in Dallas. Her brother answered. He told me what he always told me, that Chelsea was out on a date with a rich, rich football player, and that I didn’t deserve her.

“When I’m old enough, I’m gonna kick in your faggot face.”

He was twelve. I said I couldn’t wait. Kick true. Told him I definitely deserved it. After that, I tried a few more people, old high school girlfriends, but couldn’t get through to anyone.

I had a few beers. A few more. I trembled around in circles, around and around our complex. Finally, my one local friend swung by after work. He had a six-pack. The two of us on my front stoop in the dank night. Spotted slugs emerged from the grass, oozed across the dirty walkway, and disappeared. This buddy of mine, he was a pale guy with short legs and a large belly. He asked me how work was going and I wanted to tell him about the pink house, but I couldn’t figure out how to start the story. Couldn’t figure how to make it sound as terrifying as it was. The longer I held it in, the more I thought about what had happened and how to convey it, the more scared I got. Then I was on up on my feet, keys squeezed in my fist. “I need to drive around, come on, hop in my car.”

“It’s past midnight, man, and we drank too much.”

“It’s not a long drive and I’ll go slow.”

“Go slow to where?”

I sat back down, mute. We drank some more, drank fast, and then I wanted to play Scrabble but it was too late to wake up the neighbor kid.

Peter. That was the neighbor kid, but my buddy, for the life of me, I don’t remember his name. He was two years older than me, and his face looked like Morrissey’s. That was his whole thing. People were always telling him the resemblance was eerie. I remember it made the guy feel special. He said I looked like Adam Ant, but it didn’t have the same ring. For some reason, I think my friend sold cars at a Ford lot, but I can’t be certain. I do remember he rented a room in his parents’ house. His walls, his doors, even his ceiling, were slathered with WANTED posters, overlapping mug-shots of vacant-eyed criminals because his dad worked for the post office.

What else? I remember his girlfriend was still in high school and he wanted so bad to get married, was always bringing it up. Anyway, I never talked to him again, not after I moved home to Colorado, but that night, after my creepy delivery, we stayed up until it was nearly light. We sat on my stoop and made plans for him to visit Gunnison. Or, shit, why didn’t he just move out there with me? He *and* his girl? I told him of the vistas, the deep canyons, how there were only five stoplights in town, and how the nights up there, up at that altitude, got so cold your eyelids froze open.

My buddy, he kept trying to change the subject, his voice distressed, like the picture I’d painted terrified him. I told him it was an air-tight plan. My Toyota, sure, she

had over two-hundred thousand miles, but she was a wagon, spacious, and we could weave all over the country. We'd start with New Orleans and then over to Big Bend, and then hike down into Carlsbad Caverns. My Toyota, she'd been in our family for years and who knows how many trips. Dad and Mom in the front, and me and my sisters sprawled out in the back. Dad would make this huge bed for us. He'd lay down the backseat and smother it with foam mattresses and layer upon layer of blankets. Up until even twelve or thirteen, I was always having nightmares and wetting my bed, waking up not knowing where or who I was, but on trips, in the back of that car, my sisters packed around me, I'd press my ear to the carpeted wheel-well and slip in and out of the most perfect sleep—the humming asphalt, the steady click of pavement. Then, when I awoke at whichever national park or historical site Dad wanted to explore, I always felt ready.

At some point that early morning, Jess came home. In the blue glow, she stepped out of her car and walked cautiously toward us. She been partying and her clothes were slack, her hair tangled and high. It wouldn't break her heart when I left—she'd act like it, but it wouldn't. She said nothing to us, didn't even make eye contact. She cut a wide loop into the grass, out around our beer bottles, and went inside. My armpits were damp, my forehead hot. I heard the air conditioner rattle to life and I told my buddy I'd see him later.

Inside, my sister was out cold, curled on our torn sofa. The radio was on. I shook her and told her to get in bed. She said no. The song playing, I'd heard it plenty but never listened to it. Right then, though, that's all there was, the Counting Crows singing, *“Maria came from Nashville with a suitcase in her hand, said she'd like to meet a boy*

who looks like Elvis.” Tamara’s real name was Maria, and at this point in my life, I didn’t believe in coincidence. I believed in God and I hated him, but I believed in him. Pulling the comforter off Jessica’s bed, I covered her, then sat beside her and let myself cry as the song played out. It was a message from the Lord, all of it, the whole night. “*Maria says she’s dying, through the door I hear her crying.*”

The room closed in. I’d drifted too far. I knew what the song was saying. Drugs, fornicating, deceiving, sinning—it was saying I had AIDS. There would be no France, no Italy. At home in my small town and riddled with lesions—those weren’t ingrown hairs on my legs—I’d wither away. I’d cry out to Jesus and he’d take me back, but a blood test was a waste. There’s a point when you turn your back on God for just so long, when you actually start to feel guilt is natural. I stared at my sister’s mouth agape, her drunken sleep, and decided that when she woke up we’d drive over there. That’s right, out to the pink house. We’d bring knives and flashlights, and kick in their front door. Because it didn’t matter if they were ghosts or just assholes, all that mattered was we were coming for them.

CUT BUT NOT DRIED

Son, sucker that he is, perpetual push-over, goes and answers his phone. Within seconds it's the same bone picked past clean. The forever on and on about how Mother won't suffer Washington, her whys and why-nots. How no part of that corner-stuffed state will the woman abide, but most especially its western brinks, the township of Olympia, its face-down skies in muddled scuttle, that clutch and claw of its teeming and deep-dark flora. Nor Olympia's briny breezes, for that matter. Nor its gritty diners or hordes of Kurt Cobain street sprog—though Mother doesn't fathom this Kurt Cobain reference, doesn't need to. She'll simply go on refusing. Will never confess that her distain is based solely on the material, her undies bungled over superficial senses, preferences of climate and geography.

On the other pierced hand, Son's no gem. Won't get the hint either. Won't see how maybe it's not worth it, how, alas, he's beyond desperate to eke a confession from the woman though he doesn't know why. But he *feels* why. Sure. Feels it so bad and it's a veritable burr, a hang-nail, a sty on the lid, nipping at his every blink. "Only say it this once, Mother. Go on, say Olympia's just not up to your precious snuff." Desperate, and desperate worse than Mother because he's trying to sound like he's not. "Really, Mom, that's all I need to hear and then we can be nice and happy with each other, and can talk about the happy things and happy times, about cooking and walking and puppies, OK? But just give me that first, Mom. Concede that your hate for Olympia is all surface, all

stubborn justification to get your way.”

“Justification? My way?”

“—or the highway, exactly, justification, falsification, ratification. Come on, Mom, say it’s nothing more than your abhorrence of the dreadlocked patria, all that puffing of American Spirits by dirty people cloaked in so much dirty, high-latitude blue drizzle. Say it’s the butch punkies gelled-up and roaming those graffitied alleys, say it’s the mulleted and rednecked Ron Paul subscribers gunning their jacked-up Silverados through misty mornings, oh, say it, I want to hear you shout, *‘Look at them go! Pompous heathens with their windows agaped for yollering those stupid juiced-out plagiarisms of one Robert James Ritchie!’*”

“Nathan, I’m lost in your babel. James who? Huh? Admit what?”

“My babel, Mom? *Mine?* Another evasion, right there! Aka the Kid Rock, Mom! Tea Parties and diesel duelies and Anglo-Rastafarians—”

“No, no, no, Nathan, please, stop. And even if I knew what you were talking about, I’d admit no such thing, for you’ve got it all wrong, and it’s not about Rocking Kid or lesbian libertarian loudmouths, we’ve been over this. Yes, there’s sin in Olympia, sure, but then there’s sin everywhere. You think I don’t know this, but I do, Nathan. I know there’s sin in Colorado, too. And I know that with sin, Son, come sinners. I’m a sinner, and you’re a sinner—”

“I’m not a sinner.”

“Ha! Ha! Oh boy. Yes. Yes, you are, Nathan. You’re fallen short of the Glory of God, but that’s fine because I love the sinner and I hate the sin. That’s what I do, for the Lord gives me this special power and I love you, Son, do you love me? Nathan?”

“Mom—”

“See! No, you don’t, your answer is no, Son. Because you can’t, not really, for you only see my Holiness and it gets your Darkness itching—

“Gross—”

“—and these things you mention, these aspects of Olympia, well they’re nothing more than symptoms.”

“Symptoms?”

“You’re blinded by the parasite of pride, you are, my poor, poor Nathan. But I do, I see, and oh so clearly. I see the disease that’s much deeper than the sin—ah, now *that’s* the thing, yes, the disease is everything, Son, and it’s Pluralism, this Age of Aquarius mumbo-jumbo, not some standard-of-living choice, not some measly exterior issue, no, see, evil is run all through that entire city and most of the state, and that evil is a blasé gaiety over the fact of Judgment Day.”

“Wow! I like that! ‘Blasé gay!’”

“Yes, you would, Nathan, because you sadly can’t feel it.”

“Derrida.”

“Dear me.”

“I’m the textuality of my text, Mom? That what you’re saying?”

““God gave them a spirit of stupor, eyes so that they could not see and ears so that they could not hear, to this very day’...”

“Yeah, Yeah, Romans.”

“Yes, Nathan, and just like that verse, you know full well why you can’t feel the impending voice of doom: because you’re not in touch with the Spirit. Not in touch

anymore, for a long, long ago you went and cowed, Son, went and traded your birthright for a mess of popular pottage!”

“Traded my pot for a mess of afterbirthage?”

“The Scriptures say what? They say that in the last days mockers will come—Come!”

“Muscular contractions in pelvic locales—”

“Look, I don’t know what you’re talking about, oh, but Nathan, I know you’re belittling me. I do. And what you do to the least of my brethren, the Lord warns, you do unto Me!”

“The King will reply? The King will reply?”

“I’m not going to play these games—”

“—Olympic Games!”

“I’ll hang up, Son!”

“Then stop, Mother, *please!*”

“Stop what?”

“*Just say it.* Plainly. Say Olympia isn’t your bag, your deal, your context, your speed. I mean, why does it have to be spiritually oppressed by Principalities of Beelzebub? Why can’t it just be a different sort of lifestyle?”

“Lifestyle! Lifestyle!”

“Yes, Mom, this isn’t *The Stand*.”

“Deer stand? Hand stand?”

“Stephen King.”

“That man’s possessed. Ah! See! You know!”

“No, Mom, what I know is that your precious Boulder is sunny and bright because the Köppen climate classification system calls it semiarid, and I know that when you account for Boulder’s lofty elevation, for the warm and strong Chinook winds—”

“Stephen King, I mean, there you go again, Nathan, always with your secular allusions. But me, I’m in the World but not of it, Son, and so I happily have no idea—”

“It’s one of his most popular books. Written while in Boulder—”

“An occult writer who tangles with demons and makes a black fortune, and ends up a quadriplegic!”

“Huh? What? Quadriplegic?”

“Proving, Nathan, how God is not mocked, and you remember that!”

“I will, because Stephen King’s *not* quadriplegic, Mom, so you remember that.”

“Isn’t he? *Isn’t* he?”

And just like that, Mother’s grunting again, her breath clamoring through the phone. She’s talking and hiking simultaneously. Always with the talking and hiking, tromping miles and miles across those open-timbered and pristinely maintained trails of the Front Range foothills. Always looking down through so much easy vegetation at her precious Boulder. It’s a bidaily ritual, so she’s grunting, but Son knows the noise is for effect alone. Mother’s anything but out of shape. She’s sixty-six and the keenest of dieters. Currently, the woman has seven special eating routines. Like no sugar, that’s one, and no red meat, and no vinegar, and no dairy, and only six kinds of beans as of this month, four kinds of nuts as of last. “Nathan, my nutritionalist says I’m having difficulty with the bathroom and with the sleeping because I’ve been using the wrong kind of fish oil! Can you believe that! What’s your fish oil? You do take fish oils, don’t you?”

“Of course I take fish oils. Who do you think I am? Don’t change the subject, Mom.”

“But have you sought a nutritionist, Nathan?”

“You mean a *Born Again* nutritionist.”

“I didn’t say that, but bad friends do corrupt good morals.”

“So you’ve got a Born Again nutritionist, a Born Again psychiatrist, a Born Again chiropractor, and a Born Again spiritual advisor.”

“My sheep hear my voice.”

“And most assuredly you’ve got a Born Again automobile mechanic, yes, Mom, I know. Though they don’t work for tithes, do they, these baptized specialists? Alas, one cannot live on gluten alone—isn’t that what they say in The People’s Republic of Boulder?”

“I haven’t heard—”

“But why might they say this, Mother? Isn’t it because the city’s costs are ludicrously exorbitant? Though, luckily, you’ve got Dad’s credit cards subsidizing your squishy lifestyle, or for now, at least. Dad slaving and fourteen-hundred miles away, and you’re just totally cool with the whole scheme, aren’t you, Mother?”

“It’s not a scheme, Nathan. Your father ... it’s *maintenance*, Son. I deserve it. In light of the man’s backsliding. But come on, Nathan, let’s forget all the goofy talk—”

“Goofy talk!”

“Boy, I wish you were here. What a beautiful day here in Boulder! Not a cloud in the sky, I tell you! So bright and crisp! Sunlight and meadows and baby deer playing! Halleluiah, and, listen, Son! Son, I found another job!”

“You did? That’s great news, Mom!”

“For your father—”

“Oh.”

“No, Nathan, it’s a perfect fit! A true door thrown open by the Almighty! And this despite the man’s wicked ways! It shows the Lord’s mercy.”

“Come off it. Dad’s perfectly pleased with Olympia.”

Mother goes silent. Son inhales with supreme deliberation. Son clenches his white-whiskering jaw skin and shuffles his rubber boots through the mud of his front yard. He switches ears. He quietly begins again. “Mom, I’m just saying that let’s not forget it was a mutual decision when you moved to Washington. Both you and Dad—”

“Hogwash, Nathan. It was *not*. I was worried for his health, his peace of mind, so I was only doing my duty as a Godly wife, dying to self for the sake of my marriage.”

“Fine, but you just couldn’t make Olympia home, right, Mom? And this is why Christianity is so selfish, because you moved out of obligation and that created spite, until you couldn’t stand that the man was content in the Northwest, was finding peace and truth and more happiness beyond, well, beyond simply you and your frothing dogmatism.”

Huffing. Huffing. Mother. Into the phone. *Too harsh?* Son thinks, but he gets his answer. Mother’s huffing turns to asthmatic puffing. She’s puffing harder and harder into the phone, puffing wheezes like trying to whisk this question away from her immaculate makeup and her perfectly-styled hair, wheezing until she’s got to start gasping, until Son knows exactly what’s coming.

That's a wrap. Mother hangs up. Son heads inside, right for the fridge. He cracks a third beer, chides himself. *Again?* Man, why? Why'd you answer the phone again? It's guilt, most assuredly, and he knows this. A nagging shame. A solid allowance of his foolish heart still accrediting Mother's hints that it's his fault their forty-year marriage hangs in a balance of immoral relativity. It's Son's fault Father abandoned Evangelicalism, left it like so much adolescent lexicon...

Ah, yes, right there, yet another note Mother will never admit, will never say Father's spiritual angst hit a roiling boil long before the move from small-town Colorado to distant Olympia, long before Son was even out of high school. No, rather, like all Mother's cut-and-dried perspectives, Father simply snapped, one absolutely random day the man AWOLed. He opened his ears to the demonic whispers, did so just months before their move but, see, *after* they'd already made the joint decision to go. The man snapped, not coincidentally, Mother believes, right when their agnostic heir gave Dad that wicked, wicked book.

Sponge. Sponge, being the author, or as Mother says, "That Sponge opened your father up to Satan's doubts and falsehoods." Though it's actually Spong, no *e*. Bishop John Spong, and Mother knows the guy's real name but insists on employing her epithet. She's so angry about the book, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die*, but has she read it? No. Not even flipped through. Not even touched it, for if she did it might burn her, leak via osmosis. Though, peculiarly, there's this—Son agrees that Mother's correct on one warrant of her claim: Son did have ulterior motives beyond casual reading entertainment, yes. And when Sponge sparked a mass of tinder in the Father's mind, well Son had hoped for this ignition. Why? Son had—for years—known of Father's hidden mysticisms. Son

had been on the trail of his old man's closeted hots for messy metaphor, for the de-mythologizing of Paul's heinous constitutionals ... but, and also, Son had realized such intimations of recidivism would never trump the man's devotion to family, no, never, or not when family was still a question.

Strategizing, then, on Son's part. For when Son's youngest sister finally fled the protracted nest of homeschooling, after she, the last child, moved from the Rockies and settled in Portland, only then did Son dish Father said Spong. But not as a strategizing of marital demise, no, never. Because Son's motivation was love, was a worry for Father. Scared even, Son was, for with Father's kids all grown and flown, the man was stripped of any reason to remain the Heroically Christian Unquestioning Papa Yoked in a Marriage of Blind Belief. The man was stripped of a thirty-seven-year mantle, and, likewise, withering. Son saw Father withering. Saw him torn between once-precious doctrines gone stale and an abiding—if not misogynistically-dutiful—love for his legalistic wife. Father would often call Son deeply depressed, calling whilst gobbling Prozac, whilst gaining lethargic pounds, Son's phone ringing at odd hours. In the earliest morning, his old man cursed his own life's work, his pharmacy career, his fading youth. Father recited, over and over, how he was just far too tired, had no desire left, no drive to get on the bike, to put on running shoes and sweat away the apathy of a forever self-belating Rapture.

"Slick, sometimes Heaven can't goddamn get here soon enough."

So there you have it, right? Son's unshakable sense of culpability grounded in Pure Love. But so there you also have why he continues to answer Mother's calls—for just because one doesn't believe something doesn't mean one can simply discount its

physical churning within one's gut. And the story goes on. Then there was the initial fallout from Spong. How, with one whiff of Father's blossoming Born Againstism, Mother and The Church responded steadfastly. "No, Tommy! Bad Tommy! Carry your cross, Tommy. God won't forsake you, Tommy. Run the Good Race. Don't Miss the Mark or you'll pay with your eternal soul!"

Though Father only heard fear-mongering. Heard mean-questioning racket balls bouncing his skull. Which race and who was judging? Which god? The God of Ol' Crooked-speak Jacob, or the God of one Dr. James Dominionist Dobson? Or maybe the Abba of Yeshua? Was that the one? The very Dad who'd forsaken his only son, let the kid suffocate, bleed-out, draped and tacked-up on a couple of rugged tree scraps, and all for some petty didacticism that never panned out as unconditional love? "Abuse of power," said Father, but Mother and The Church hackled and growled all the louder.

"No, Tom! Bad Tom! The Almighty resurrected his son, and *literally*, and that's the fact of all facts to face, that the Gospels are nothing less than synoptic, the miracles, the parthenogenesis, the exorcisms, and death-healings, either you believe them or it's sacrilege, and either you repeat after us, Tom, either you rejoin us, Tom, and cast away your evil book, or it's most certainly Hell and heresy!"

Too late, though. All of it now a bald-face lie to Father. And in the book, well Spong never says he wants to destroy Christianity, only reshape it, revitalize it. That's right, the Born Again reborn as an all-around embrace of paradox's illogically spooky truths. Like negation as growth. Like the unilateral blurring of doctrinaire binary. Same as Father had wanted to do for years, do with his own spirituality, with his marriage in kind. Meaning deconstruct and then rebuild around a mutual respect, not around an

obligation to, and a fear of, God's impending wrath. There you have it, just like Father's forever-favorite axiom: *Don't throw the baby out with the bathwater*. So the man's going, "Sponge, yes exactly! Like, wring it out and wring it on! Sponge! Expunge!"

But how, how was Father to proceed when *he* was the baby and Mother, along with her increasingly recalcitrant church buddies, had always been the bathwater? And so the move, see, it *was* mutual. For Mother and Father prayed over it, prayed together, and God told Mother that he had the whole world in His hands. God told Mother that moving to Olympia would somehow cement the family back into the Evangelical dynamo it had been in 1983. And this really did seem the case, too, for Mother had been perfectly peachy those initial months in Washington. All aglow, she was, because for the first time in twenty years she lived within an easy drive of all three, settled kids. All aglow with the notion that grandbabies were on the way, and that her immediate and righteous influence would finally win out.

Or maybe it was just the fact that everything's divine in a Pacific Northwest summer? Ah, those long days of lush July sunlight infused with optimism and low humidity and fresh produce. With cheap seafood and dreamy sea breezes and plenty of sinners too stoned out of their minds to care how many times Mother reminds them Jesus has a perfect plan for each of them...

Son tries, too. Tries continually reminding himself that Mother adored Olympia when she first arrived, but, once again, her romantic daydreams got the better of her. That summer fantasy diffused with the seasons and all fluffiness was lost to winter's monophonic drizzle. Mother's plush and springy hiking trails turned to muddy slurp while, above her, the monstrous firs writhed and banshee-moaned in high-torque winds

that promptly tumbled her into a wild and inky funk.

But, suspiciously, this funk was in exact proportion to Father's flourishing. In that sunless mist, out from under Colorado's stringent, high-altitude rays, Father thrived. Away from Rocky Mountain living that had molted the man's pale-Irish hide a scaly pink, had caked his eyes with cataracts and floaters, he could, at long last, jog and bike like never before. Away from the myopic conventions of their small town, and away from their tiny community church, heck, Olympia full-on fueled Father's Spong smolder. It raged into a blaze. This quirky berg pulsed a sloppy oxymoronity, a sense of weird community Father had yearned for all his life. What, with Oly's stew of anarchists and three-piece politicians, with its crew-cut soldiers beside unbathed Evergreeners, with its energy-drink hicks elbow-rubbing yachting yuppies in so much multiformity and all mushed together in this stubby Popeye town of gum-smeared sidewalks and tattoo parlors and dingy pubs.

And, plus, Oly's ideas of family, identity, politics, and spirituality, were as nebulous as Father's had always secretly been. Nebulous, but coolly denuded, meaning the move couldn't have come soon enough, and never had Son and his two sisters seen their old man so jazzed. Really. Like we're talking even amidst the robotic grind of his prescription-filling trade, he'd lost the tirades, the multitasking mania, he'd even found—

“What? Shut up, Pops! Did you say *friends*?”

“Yeah, Slick, my friends, and what's so funny with that?”

“*What's so funny?* Well, for one, and for an entire lifetime, man, you've been relocating. Six states and never in the same neighborhood more than six years, and if you weren't sniffing after utopic mirages, Pops, well you were returning to past haunts on

nostalgia and useless fumes, but, man, nowhere could you feel you really fit, not Midwestern salt-of-the-earth Kansas, not white-collar conservative Virginia, not rugged mountain-man Rockies—these would-be homesteads inevitably smothered your flouncy heart, Dad, but Olympia, man, it takes your oblong peg right in its creamy loose oblong hole!”

“Hm, OK, I think I see what you mean...”

But does Son see what he himself means? In this same light mustn't Son admit he can see why Mother loves Boulder? Can see how there was no way the woman could leave Olympia and return to their tiny mountain town, to their tiny church. No, not sans a Godly husband, for there'd be far too many interrogations as to whether, too many rumors and spotlights on her possible fault in the split...

“Oh, but Boulder! Son, three hundred days of sunshine!”

Yes, and stark-thrusting Flatirons and clean streets and even cleaner health food stores. And let's not forget how the city even boasts a green-belt of open space protecting residents from sprawl and subsequent riff-raff, from the degentrification of its medium two-bedroom home values at a cool half-million. It's the contrapositive of Olympia's jumbled claustrophobia, of Olympia's petri-dish mist and muck wherein every day Mother saw her perfect hair and prim dress collapsing further into grunge-frump, and those feelings of being hunted, watched, on those sodden winter walking trails, and the sense of pointlessness, unsure how to evangelize on those filthy streets with their scruffy and homeless Taoists, Nihilists, bus-stop philosophers. Or worse, much worse, how Mother couldn't find a house of worship that prized her. Not liked she'd been prized

before, how for decades she'd been the prom queen of every congregation, most animated singer, most gregarious witness, most flat-out-sexy dissenter of sex education and gay rights and evolution and abortion and pornography and humanistic relativity and that most malevolent force of all: the demon of divorce.

In Olympia, with no clear Christian majority to cheerlead her efforts, Mother cast off her Biblical pompoms. It was as if the whole of that city were seeking truth for the mere sake of seeking truth, never wanting to find it, arrest it, the populous-total content with not knowing where they went when they died, not caring how commandments fit together. So Mother's pulpit vanished and the woman holed-up, prolonged her prayer time. Soon it wasn't worth looking for a church or going to the gym. She stopped sleeping, showering, eating organically, started hearing voices, twisting her hair out in oily clumps, she'd even throw up on the carpet and just leave it for Father to blot when he got home from out there, wherever he was, cavorting with those local pagans...

A stone zealot of four decades, and only this once has Mother's faith caved. See, only once has the Lord abandoned her—but it was understandable and forgivable that He did, for, come on, God's unalloyed rectitude wouldn't stomach the Gomorrah of Olympia, and the great Godliness in Mother had rejected the place like an unclean piercing. Must have been that, not her, never. Not her fault that she was left prayer-less and drooling and doped to the nines. Wasn't her fault that her family got her chocked-full of Risperidone so they could try to talk her into remaining in that place, trapped in the Puget Sound's foggy belch of lions' den despair, their hope to turn her finally to the Dark Side—

Though Son doesn't believe this, does he? Any of this blather she spouts. Just like he doesn't believe in God, in Fate, in Absolute Truth, in redemption and supplication and masochistic humping with invisible masters ... But. So. Why? Why then is Son's guilt never leaving, never forsaking? And then there's the painful idea that his own guilt can't even comprehend what his Father's measure must feel like, or the guilt that Son will never, can never, comprehend the confusion and fear Mother might be facing. Like, come on, the woman's entire paradigm of love and marriage crumbled under her, these firmaments she supposed were forever stable, and then they're not just quivering, but cracking, shaking sand, spewing lava, rag-dolling her around and around until what could the woman do but cling more steadfastly to The Rock of her Salvation, to The Stone that the human builders neglected. What could she do but run to the mountains and tell herself that The Mountain—the only force in the universe that really mattered—stood by her? What bottomless agony, Son wonders, is she cloaking with that shimmering blanket of Boulder? So...

Guilt and shame, yes, but also a patience beyond Son's own understanding. How caring continues to well-up within him. But what force is perpetuating his foolish love for Mother? Or perpetuating it until the moment Son answers the phone and hears that angelic pitch of the woman's voice, it's a bittersweet tincture of cursed salvation, and, immediately, Son's patience shows its colors—a romantic want just as strong as any of hers, a burning need to have a mother that's not Mother. But that's not possible. And here his patience flashes its fangs and he's reminded, yet again, of the awful facts: *she* did the leaving, has *always* been leaving, forever packing her things with those green eyes locked on streets paved with gold. How she lives her days with Bluetooth securely fastened so

she's never ever alone, never abandoned to her own watery, human thoughts. Yes, all Son's life, same drill: Mother's got multiple Prayer Chains on speed-dial, caches of Bible-thumping friends eager to check off lists and lists of names with her. Names, mind you, jotted in Mother's sanctified notebooks, and this is no lie—literally, notebook after notebook Mother keeps with times of events and names of legislations, institutions, of strangers and acquaintances, all these particulars for whom Mother believes she is required to devote hours and hours of daily supplication, hours and hours begging God that His will be done, and, subsequently, this leaves almost no time at all, no time to—

“Yeah, but what about a job for you, Mom?”

“Nathan, please.”

“No, Mom, tell me, what incentive does Dad have to follow your flight to Boulder, to come to you to patch up the marriage while you just hang out, spending his money on witnessing? The guy's working his ass off up in Oly, sending you three grand a month—”

“Nathan! Your language. And I *am* working.”

“I bet.”

“Don't do that with me, because I am, Nathan. And I'm proud I'm doing the Lord's labor, for all other endeavors only store up treasures on earth that moth and rust doth corrupt.”

“Don't say *doth*, Mom.”

“I didn't say it, Nathan, the Bible says it. And so I do have a job, the *best* job.”

“No, you have a title, not a job, and the title is Missionary. Is it not? For some

Christian International Student Center.”

“That’s correct. Job *and* title.”

“Yup, got yourself holed-up, and in exchange for most of your meals and slightly-discounted lodging, your single responsibility is to subtly proselytize those resident Muslims, Buddhists, and other Non-Believing foreigners captured by the place. And the rest of your exorbitant tab, the Whole Foods shopping and strict dietary needs, Dad pays. Dad pays out of a heart-throttling dread, for he’s convinced that if he cuts you off completely you’ll once again beeline for the psych ward, force him to move back to Colorado, make him white-knight away from Oly to nurse you back to sancto-religious sanity—”

“Nathan, don’t you condemn me. I *am* looking for work and in fact this boy here at the Center, Mohammad, he’s helped me put ads and my resume up on The Craig Listing. That’s right. And already a Filipino man wants me for tutoring English, that’s right. He’s asked for my bank information, and he’ll put money right into my account.”

“Jesus Christ, Mom! Shit don’t do it!”

“Nathan! NO! The mouth speaks what the heart is full of!”

“Mom, you call that looking for work?”

“It’s very hard to get hired at my age, and with my back problems, and without the computer skills, just so many issues with my health—”

“You hike ten miles a day, Mom! And Dad’s paid for six private tutors to give you computer lessons.”

“—Anyway, yes, Nathan, the tutoring of this Filipino man, but, um, does that sound fishy to you? Son? No, no, don’t answer that. Yes, maybe it does, but the point is

that the Lord's heard my plea, Nathan, he has! So many jobs here for your father!

Nathan, you really must encourage Dad to get the Olympia townhouse on the market, get it sold. Nathan? Are you there?"

"You left him, Mom."

"I got terribly sick. Next thing I know I'm here and don't even know how!"

"You told us you had to get out of Olympia, that's how. You said dark powers were eating you from the inside out and that you were going insane, and you said you needed sunshine, and that you thought the police were after you, and that God was punishing you."

"Nathan, I didn't want to move northwest in the first place, but your father, he's never happy, and so I moved to save our marriage, and I'm trying to save it again! Nathan, this isn't a joke, wasn't one, you know that. I was, *am*, wrestling demons—"

Mother interrupts herself. Manufactures that time-honored coughing fit, dry hacking, heavy wheezing, and again, like so often, the noise conjures in Son a distinct desire to choke her out of her misery while simultaneously cradling the woman back to perfect calm, kissing her cheeks, weeping violently over the tenuous connection they have, over this familiar stranger he'll never really know...

Sick, Son thinks, but really, who's the sick one here?

"I can see for miles, Nathan! All of Boulder!"

"You're saying you're better now, Mom?"

Cough. Cough.

"Mom, go back to Oly. Heal your marriage and be a partner, not a Judeo-

Christian witch.”

“I should hang up, Nathan.”

“Wow, see, there’s a start.”

“Go back to what? When your father wants to be with *those* people, not me.”

“His friends?”

“Friends! No, Nathan, friends don’t corrupt good morals...”

Mother trails off, tired, so tired. And Son’s tired too because it’s all been said before, all this talk about Father’s friends, about Waves. Though Mother refuses to say the name, “Waves.” It’s what the studio’s called, where Father dances now instead of church. Though not mere dancing, but *Body Intelligence*. Father likes to say this, say, “We drop out of the mind, Slick, and into the body—it’s about learning to listen to both!”

“*Mom*, Dad didn’t leave you, he wants you to be part of the community that saved him when you were—”

Son stops himself because he doesn’t want to say sick, so he says *healing*, sending Mother right back to her scorn. “Community! Ha! I visited that creepy studio, Nathan, scroungy women, flitty men, everyone undulating, eyes rolling, worshipping their false gods!”

Son smiles despite himself. Grins at the problem of truth. How, to the lay observer, Mother’s dead-on. Waves *is* just that, oddly idolic, a swarm of neo-hippies spinning, writhing, yelping, hopping, but, there’s also the catch that Father dances these two-hour sessions with no alcohol, no drugs, no specific doctrine, no Pentecostal gestalt. Nope, only music. Three, four, five nights a week, following a wave of five rhythms—flow, staccato, chaos, lyrical, stillness...

“That dancing was just too familiar, huh, Mom, is that it?”

“Familiar? Please.”

“I mean, could it be you’re reminded too closely of all those Sundays when you led me down in front of the alter at Full Faith Church of Love for dancing and tambourines and shouting in Tongues? To be *Slain in the Spirit*? Mom? *SLAIN! In the goddamn Spirit?*

Son exhales slowly, and this is what, beer four, six? She hasn’t hung up on him. And when did she call back? Or had he? And he wants to say more, more of the same, to say, *Admit it’s not about God, admit...* but he can only manage, “Do you love Dad?”

“Don’t be silly, Nathan.”

“Do you love *me*, Mom?”

She’s coughing again, and she’ll cough so badly, and another mountain will appear in front of her and she’ll lose her breath, her signal, and gone.

Son’s phone is dead again, but there’s the hitch in all of this that Son can’t get around: as Mother’s anything but subtle, surely there’s major chaffing’s afoot in her precious Boulder. The center where she works is on to her hyperbolics. They’re on to her bipolar witnessing styles, and they’re starting to wonder if her husband really just tossed her out, or, maybe, if there’s more to her woes. They’re starting to see the ease with which she embellishes, hides in her room, slips out to hike all day so that she doesn’t have to confront the other staff members. Wondering, they are, if maybe, just maybe, she’s using them, using their Christianity, to avoid reality, and this is what Son is half wondering as he pours out his beer and zigzags into the backyard to piss in a hedge. The

running out of time. The woman having to find a new scam if she wants to avoid Olympia, to remain in her crisp, cartoon world of Beautiful Boulder. Ultimatums looming, blooming, but for whom, and so love isn't a motherfucking choice, it's a sticky web that can never be—

Father's calling. Son finishes pissing. Doesn't shake enough. Warm down his leg. "Is it my fault, Slick, is it?" Father's asking. "Moving her all those times and encouraging her not to work so I could work and work, no time to doubt whether or not we were right or wrong about the End of the World, about the Kingdom of God being outside rather than inside us?"

"Pops, fuck, you slaved and moved because you didn't have friends, only church monitors, only measuring sticks—"

"I know, I know, but every night, Slick, I wake up in that too-big bed wondering why I don't head to Boulder, fake it, the clapping, the singing about fear and sin, about how great it'll be to die, to flee this rotten earth, but I can't worship only half a Jesus, the broken and dead god, ignoring the wild human, the carpenter who spits riddles that couldn't be answered, the rebel who cavorted with..."

Father trails off, but Son's suddenly not worried. Son's turns back toward his home and he's not listening to anything, only seeing the warm glow of his windows, a shadow of his wife inside, and then Son's picturing Waves in the Washington winter din, he's seeing inside the dance studio's rain-streaked windows, the music beginning softly—in that low light, that shivering body heat—a cyclonic sway of professors and state workers and servers and electricians and artsy coeds and limping vets and overweight soccer moms and cheek-pierced dropouts and menopausal baristas and stocky

rock climbers, but the tide parts for the long-lost pharmacist of white hair, face lobster red, sweat-damp tie-dye t-shirt clung to six feet of solid, sixty year old muscle. Father snakes his arms, wiggles his knees, he's grinning a rapture, and Son can't take his eyes away, even as the man spins off again, lost as tumult, only to reappear in a slow dance with a pair of lanky butches, drifting, floating, the beats increasing, pounding, Father again emerging in a circle of guys, all ages, nineteen to seventy, gripping each other's waists, leaping, bellowing, roaring life for five minutes, ten, and they squeeze and kiss and kick until their feet sting, until they crumble to the floor in a mass of laughter, a moment devoid of fear, retribution, loneliness, or, much worse than these things, Son thinks, thought.

PORNOGRAPHY: 13 NOTES

1. There's a bumper sticker I see every few months—last on a limping Subaru Brat—stating, “Real Men Don't Use Porn.” I get the image of a man not using porn, only eyeing it suspiciously, a child served a foreign food. This man's arms are crossed and he's scowling. *There are plenty of other ways to solve the problem*, he's thinking, *because I'm resourceful—there are other things I can use.*
2. Another common bumper sticker reads, “Real Men love Jesus.” Once I saw this *and* “Real Men Don't Use Porn” on the same Nissan Armada (which is just one car) and I cheered. I'm not certain why. I was riding my clanking bicycle up a very steep hill on a very cold day and I was sweating. At the top of the hill was a busy bus stop. I got gooseflesh thinking of all the people watching me defeat the hill as they stood there freezing and fat—fat and freezing in so much subcutaneous worthlessness. Then I saw the bumper stickers and whooped like, I imagine it now, a young brave.
3. Sometimes I won't masturbate to porn for two months, but then I'll remember, like an old sweatshirt I once adored, and soon it's all I think about. *How did I forget? Am I repressed? Did guilt make me cease?* I'm agitated because it's not about the sex or even the idea of the sex. It's not about my wife, either. It's about

the one primal question that defeats all questioning. It's why Medea murders her children. It's why Judas hangs himself. It's why, in *Top Gun*, Maverick asks, "What's your problem, Kazanski?" "You're everyone's problem," replies Kazanski, "that's because every time you go up in the air you're unsafe. I don't like you because you're dangerous." "That's right, Iceman," Maverick says, "I am dangerous."

4. Recently, my little sister broke up with her boyfriend because he chose porn over her. This is simplifying the problem, but I think it's exemplary of the relationship's demise. She was out of town for three days and returned eager to spend time with him, but he wanted to watch bike porn with a friend (she was welcome to join). I did not know about bike porn. I thought it was Brad's clever euphemism for drooling over pictures of new cycles, their curves, their shiny components. My sister informed me this was only an aspect. There are the women, too, she said. The women are, ostensibly, naked. The women rub on the top-tube. The women, she said, use parts of the bike in ways that the manufacturers did not intend. "Wait," I said, "isn't there supposed to be a good inch between one's crotch and the top-tube, otherwise the bike's a poor fit?"
5. When I was sixteen, I had sex for the first time. Having only one condom, and after *pre*-prematurely ejaculating, I hurried into the bathroom, rinsed it out, and wrestled the thing back on. The best I could do left it dangling, a pound dog's ear. But, luckily, the lights were low and the Swedish duo Roxette was crooning

Listen to Your Heart. Months later, Dad sat me down and said, “You’re probably getting pretty interested in girls, I’d imagine.” I told him, yes, in fact I was. “My own father never gave me the talk,” Dad said, and he allowed confusion to enter his face. He said, “Your Granddad shut me in the den and put on a record by a Catholic priest. I’m not going to do that, ever, OK?” “OK,” I said. “Good,” he said definitively, and pushed to his feet. “So, look, Slick, remember: any guy can stick a peg in a round hole ... but a real man cares about what’s around that hole.” I nodded and considered the implications of unselfishness. I stared out the window past my mom’s flowerpots. My best friend was sneaking out of my yard again, stealing my dog. Under my breath I said, “*No, no, no, no.*”

6. Porn is different from pornography. To me, pornography sounds much more theoretical—not theoretical in it might or might not be true, but that it requires a trained mind, a degree of patience and focus prior to practice, and then a Zen-like comprehension of action *as* theory; so, you know, not just any jack-off can use it.
7. Leonard Michaels, in his essay “On Love,” says pornography is “the graphic demystification and annihilation of mystery.” It’s verifiable, I say. Every time I read Brigit Pegeen Kelly’s poem “The Orchard” I feel like I’m achieving a magnificent, nearly Christ-like erection. But I don’t, never do. It’s all phantom youth. A golden buzzing around my center. A great hive of light gathering for gathering alone. Then her language sprouts in me. Her enjambment fills every furrow. How always, by the final five lines, I’m weak in the relentless rays of her

graphic giving. She gives and gives, and again I read it, and again a horse is a dog and a doe is a lover and an apple full of worms, bitten, is my own fist useless in my pants. I'm demystified by the glut of mystery. I stare at her name and can't pronounce it. I say aloud, "Brie Get Pigeon, Kelly?" then have to rest quickly, prostrate on my futon. I listen to rain on a skylight, but nothing ever explodes from my body, see. Nothing. Only my guts as a bomb underwater.

8. There is no hole in soft-core porn.

9. The internet has made porn too easy. This is not a good or bad thing. It might sound so by my use of "too easy," but too easy compared to what? It's like saying a girl is too easy. Our how Dad was always telling my older sister, "You don't want boys to think you're too easy, now do you?" Sometimes when her boyfriend and I are drinking tequila, he'll tell me that he can't keep up with her. "I don't want to have sex all the time, and for that long, and all those ways." "I don't know," I'll say. He'll shrug. "Well, she'll probably cheat on me." "I don't know," I'll say. "And some of those porn girls, they just make me sad," he'll say. "Sad?" I'll say. He nods. "One girl's kneeling on an office chair while five guys spin her around and around, having sex with her back-side." My sister's boyfriend says "back-side" not "ass." I think it's because he's Dad's same age.

10. My older sister adores porn. Go over to her house, scan her favorite DVDs from over the years—*Top Gun*, *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*, *City of Anals*, *The Princess*

Bride. Once, years ago, when we were rooming together, she tried to trade me *Chinatown Brown* for *Bang That Fucking Slut*. But *Bang That Fucking Slut* had too many scratches. Plus, she'd given me *Chinatown Brown* for my birthday like barely a month before. Some things can't be reduced to equations, can they? Who was more pornographic, the Underground Man or Liza? I have spent whole half-hours on autumn days, in the shade of my apple trees, hucking Golden Delicious to my dogs like so many disposable, tasty tennis balls and wondering what sort of Pony Express rider Lance Armstrong would have made.

11. When I was in high school my mom stole into my room when I was gone and confiscated my Cure album titled *Pornography*. I tried to explain that there was nothing pornographic about it. The confiscation of my cassette was followed by an incursion into my older sister's room. There was an unopened letter. Directed by the Holy Spirit, Mom opened it. She discovered that Jessica had lost her virginity. Mom told Dad, and they sat in the living room crying until my sister finished her shift at McDonald's. Coming in the door, Jessica said, "What? What? Did someone die?" "My little girl died!" Mom shrieked. "Who did it?" Dad growled, punching the couch. "Tell me who stole our little girl and I'll skin the punk!" Just then, my little sister walked in. "Hey," she said, "I'm not dead."
12. A German exchange student came to our high school. This was '91. He and I smoked pot in my shed and then sat sagely in my room. We spoke of girls, sex, exchange rates, cabbage, and then, inevitably, porn. When I said that sometimes I

found the lingerie sections of department store catalogs more arousing than *Penthouse* or *Hustler*, the German yelled like something had bitten him. “Hey!” he said, and smacked the side of his neck. “Are you OK?” I said. He leaned toward me and asked, sort of dazed, if I had any Pink Floyd. He and his friends, he explained, would get high, put on *Dark Side of the Moon*, and all circle-jerk. “That’s totally homosexual,” I said. “What?” he said. “No,” he said, “there’s nothing gay about it.” He was indignant, even angry. First he said it was not gay at all. Then he said we’re gay—we, as in American guys. Then he said I was gay because I thought that. Then he said I was scared and gay, *and* I’d been mispronouncing *Sturm und Drang* since we’d met. He’d been jogging his neck and shoulders the whole time, but suddenly, as if he’d exhausted their mechanisms, sat back, raised his hands like surrender, and said, “Well, do you have *Dark Side of the Moon*?”

13. When I was living in the Pacific Northwest, a man in a nearby town died after intercouraging a stallion, an actual stallion. Or, rather, being intercouraged *by* a stallion. He’d met a few likeminded fellows in a chat room and convinced them to swing by and film it. Around the same time, I was attempting to remain celibate in the wake of a bad break-up. One morning, as it worked out, having just allayed myself into a (clean) sock to Britney Spears’ video *Toxic*, and with the internet there and gracious and patient before me, I thought it would be funny to see if I could find the horse footage. It wasn’t funny. Illuminated by the sour-green of a weak floodlight, Kenneth Pinyan choked and whimpered with the beast’s every

thrust. Or maybe it wasn't the man from the news, but it was certainly a horse. It was a dark steed decapitated by shadows, its chest in a sling, its hindquarters on the ground, its tremendous biology eviscerating this foolish man's backside. My stomach upset and my mind rendered porridge, I returned to Google. I stared at my keyboard and tried to think of something funny. The horse, maybe, as a registered sex offender. Farmhouse to farmhouse, he trots, nudging on doors, ashamed and newly gelded. But it wasn't his fault, poor creature. What, I thought, became of that pitiable horse? I had to find out. I couldn't. All I found was a news article saying, "Deputies don't believe a crime occurred because bestiality is not illegal in Washington State and the horse was uninjured. But because investigators found chickens, goats and sheep on the property, they are looking into whether animal cruelty—which is a crime—was committed by having sex with these smaller, weaker animals." Lunch was ruined. So was dinner and "playtime" with my dogs. I did not want to be a person. I went on a bike ride but, the whole way, pedaled standing up. I saw hundreds of bumper stickers except I couldn't understand them. Back home, ten o'clock, twelve, three. With that dying man's grunts in my ears, I could not achieve sleep. Benadryl, Nyquil, Melatonin and Chamomile—a rout. At dawn, I tried drowning him out with more Brittany. My furious paw, a cold blue monitor, the other sock, no. *I'm a Slave 4 U* created only an alarming transposing of sounds. There was nothing I could use. No theory, no practice, just sounds, like we are all the smaller, weaker animals.

TONGUES OF MEN AND OF ANGELS

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

—Hebrews 13:1

Ol' brain-tangler. Ol' double recollectomy—as in Alzheimer's. Dad's Mom has it. Got it solid. Though notice I did not say *suffers*. Nor did I presume how much longer Grams will be with us (eighty-eight and tick-ticking). So in the spirit of such conjecture, in the spirit of preemptive respects, Dad brings what's left of the expiring gal for a quick visit to Salt Lake City. Here my wife and I chisel our living in the high desert Wasatch Valley. Apropos, we've gone back to higher education. This, post economy-crash. This after our adjuncting gigs ran sapless in Olympia, WA.

So off to the Beehive State. Me and my honeyed-skinned Michelle snickering and frowning, enveloped by many, many blond Mormon youth. Me and my singular wife tielessly gliding our bikes below that gleaming gold Angel Moroni and forever thinking, *Jumping Jehoshaphat, it's the Persons of Mitt Romney! Sanctified undies! Indian wizard tablets! Mega-misogyny on tap like Costco-style!*

No paucity of religo-mocking here, that's for sure, and we've got plenty of sideways indictments posed as questions: why's coffee out when Monster energy drinks

are hot legit? Why's homosexuality so taboo if LDS males go coo-coo for Ambercrombie? Jeez, and enough with not swearing, folks! No one's fooled with your elder-speak oath-mincing. *So I freakin' tell him*—this overheard on a downtown train—*I freakin' say, 'You can freak-off, buddy, this is our land. You don't freakin' like the way Saints freakin' feel about a semi-automatic Browning M1911 for our freakin' state emblem, move back to wherever you freakin' came from, Freakhead!'*

To which the other man replies: *Freakin' A, right!*

But alas, our fun-poking parade's dampening fast. Call it contextual lake effect, for thunderclouds of familiarity loom. After two years in town, when it comes to close acquaintances, Michelle and I are playing some gambit of Wac-a-Mo-Mo. Untold Mormons imbedded into our lives and they're filling all our negative space. Friends, neighbors, mailmen, bartenders, teacher's pets—these increasingly indefinable LDSers are straight gaping our myopia. How to account for gay elders or BYU coke-dealers? How to wrap the brain around a transgendered Glenn Beck fan?

Gosh Almighty, but the variegations won't quit. Why, just last week, I witnessed, crowding Temple Square with bland banners, hair buns, and demeanors most astringent, a throng of *Little House on the Prairie* look-alikes. These dolls were in complete remonstrance. Molly Mo's, they were, twenty-four carat, bread-n-butter Joseph Smith daughters, purists from the hinterlands of Utah, Idaho, Wyoming (whether any of this is true or not, it's what a student of mine informed me), and it seems they'd descended on Temple headquarters to protest the Britney-Spears-ing of Mormon femininity.

Hold up. I know. I know. This threw me too. But rein your wagons, people. Sounds like the pot kettle-calling, "Black! Black!" Yes but, then again, maybe these

Word-of-Wisdom nerdettes are onto something? Say, they've been reading *Forbes*, reading how the number one market-demand for plastic surgery in the U.S. is not golden San Diego or bikiniville Miami, but, per capita, right here: SL, UT.

Scout's Honor. No contest. The whole Wasatch front teeming with laser-tuck dreams...

"But hear, hear," I tell my incredulous cronies back in the Evergreen State, "it *does* make sense. How about you try it: hitched at seventeen to forgo college and unload a litter of neonatal saints? Dislocating your hips? Feed-bagging your boobies? Stretching your precious belly-skin to über Shar-Pei? And all this before age twenty-two? How else then to kill time but lipo-suckage? When the kids are off to school? When hubby's golfing? When Stephanie Myers hasn't yet carved out a spare week to sketch another blood-thirsty sparkler?"

Har har. Derision central, I am indeed. Though it could merely be projection. Am I bitterly envious of the certainty and social bonds my Restorationist neighbors possess? Jealous of their doctrines of revelation and coveting their cheery ward lights? Am I? *AM I?*

But we were speaking of Gram's Alzheimer's. Of that poor, short-circuiting mind and its visit to Salt Lake. Last spring this was. Dad and Grandma popping in to scope our new haunts. And simply delightful the old bird proved to be, going, "Hey! That one there! Is that a Jehovah Witness?"

"No, Mom, it's not."

"Oh, how about that one? That a Jehovah Witness?"

“*Mormon*, Mom,” says Dad. “You mean Mormon, not JW.”

The old gal eyeballs her son. It’s a long, long moment. She’s looking rough, no doubt. Like some wind-whipped punk seagull. Tufts of orange hair over dyed-orange scalp. Too-blue peepers cataracted to infinity and beyond. Eyes just the color of Dad’s, of mine, though hers are sinking by the second into too-thin skull skin—

Until she smiles. Until she says, “Come on, Tommy! Come on, Nathan! *I know!* Mormon! That’s my damn joke!”

Dad and I laugh, but now she doesn’t, isn’t, won’t. Her eyes glaze. Her mouth sets back to slack. Because that’s the drill. “Sundowning,” this condition of Grandma’s, some ghost in the bio-pipes playing her circadian rhythms like a stoner with a xylophone.

But despite, look at her press absurdly on! Grandma in the Kingdom of Deseret, and for the most part she was charming during her trip. Playful, ever-accommodating. I’ll readily admit, it surprised me. For I’d braced for certain blitzing. For snide fury that never came. Nope, not a whiff of the matriarch’s sternly-witted ire. Not one piercing IRA-gaze directed at my wife of Asian descent. How’s that? See, Michelle has never made Gram’s acquaintance. And Michelle happens to be (as she and I are prone to jest when bloated on Utah’s 3.2% beer) a Crackerjap.

As in half-Japanese: Crackerjap. Pretty slick tag, no? Wish I’d come up with it. That bare twist off *Crackerjack*—though what a connotative collapse! Born of *crackajack*—how the Americanism first reared its head some hundred-odd years back. Try this: “jack,” was just a generic by-name for “dude.” Term’s been with us since Old English. And “crack,” conversely, in 1890—long before the crispy tones of huffing freebase cocaine—meant “damn good and hot-to-trot.”

Or darn, shoot it all, hey we can wind time on the word even more. Scroll back to Middle English where “crack” had a distinctly paradoxical zing; if you’re a “crack,” your wit’s sharp for sure, but you’ve also been pinned by a two-edge sword, pinned as a bullshit braggart. Fine line cleverness has always cleaved. Like my mother loves quoting, Proverbs 11:2: “When Pride cometh, so cometh Shame.”

Then there’s the bumper sticker, “Jesus is coming, but who’s gonna clean it up?”

Throbbing diction, lewdly Bakhtinian, sure, but nevertheless a respectable inquiry on multiple levels. Case-in-point being that in many an Evangelical eschatology, once the Lion of Judah returns to slurp His believers cloud-side, what’s left on Earth is but a hodge-podge of wishy-washy Christians spouting pragmatically-inapplicable theories of relativity.

Which reminds one of why the Puritans fled England.

Which reminds one that “cracker” was (most specifically) a term for a southern frontiersman; “to crack” was to boast, but these early Virginians and their braggadocio, their stale stories breaking like old wafers, well, they were never what they were “cracked up to be.”

Then there’s Ryan. Yes, back now to my new world of Mormons. I must tell you of Ryan, next door, one house to the south, in our sleepy suburb of ’50s brick bungalows dubbed Rose Park. Ryan shows up at 2 a.m. He’s in a purple tunic, purple pants, face and hands slathered with purple paint. I’m in my dining room. I’m trying to schlepp *The Sound and The Fury* aloud to myself. I’m using my spitty, disabled voice, while Ryan, the deviant, he’s licking my window.

Ryan's got his nipple-length hair wrapped around his chin and he's humping my storm windows. Clearly he's jacked slaphappy on acid, and so I open the door. There he dances, under my stale porch light, blinking serenely. When he grins, his teeth Cheshire leap. He shoves a growler of IPA into my palms. He tells me to get some sleep, man, and next he lopes home. I close the door, neither alarmed nor surprised.

Michelle and I are accustomed to Ryan in our yard. If it snows, before we can act, he's shoveling our sidewalk. Fluffy powder-fuls of generosity, going, going, gone. Next he's shoveling a path across five adjacent lawns just so the mailman stays dry. The mailman! Dry! The kindness of this bastard! Who can keep up with such karma?

Then it's noon on a Thursday and Ryan strides over, pulling Luke behind in a Little Red Wagon. Out on a walk they are, but just "happen" to drop off two more growlers of pilsner.

"Jesus," I say.

"What?" he says.

"You *drink* it, Nate," Luke says. The boy's just shed his two front teeth.

"What?" Ryan says. "You think I'd bring you IPA on a day this sunny? Don't be an asshole."

"Yeah, Nate," says Luke from his wagon. "Don't look a gift horse inside its throat."

Come on, *really*? Like, the kid's five. His intelligence terrifies me. His supreme Aryan cuteness terrifies me. In the beginning, I'd think *The Omen*—but now, well, I think I'm better.

"So there you go," Ryan says, waving at the beer like he found it in his pocket

with a free bagel coupon. He tells me again not to fry my brain on coursework, and then they hurry off, Luke smiling back at me, golden bowl-haircut bouncing.

And goddamn it but maybe they're swingers, these freaks? That's what I first thought. Even the kid, I suspected. Or some FLDS operatives. That, or is this some one-upper game that Ryan's trying to drag us into, a chintzy pyramid scheme? Any day his bigheartedness is gonna flip-flop, my cynic brain wheezed. Ryan asking to borrow our lawnmower, our laptops, our pick-up truck, then what? My wife, no doubt. Her very womb. Kindness wrecking everything...

But nope, never happened. And now I wish he *would* need something. A single egg, say. And in it I've hidden—what? A key to our home? Our generosity? A treasure map to unlimited blotter? I know nowhere in Utah to buy him more acid, so instead I purchase a lovely bourbon. I stroll it over as if all on a whim but he opens the door already frowning. “What's this for?”

See what I mean? Utah.

I'm fooling no one. All that previous “crack” and “jack” accounting is fresh from the *Oxford American Dictionary*. I'm a hack! I'm a spoof of myself! The smoking gun in my hand shooting me into a million little pieces. Which, incidentally, says something about the *OAD*'s failure to include an entry for “CrackerJap.” Which brings us back to my lovely wife, Michelle—*niponas medias*—and back to my point that, had the earlier version of Grandma appeared in SLC, appeared in all her lucidity, we would have received numerous asides concerning yellowness and World War II.

All those dead-eyed, suicide-thirsty Nips...

Hey, why such animosity? I can't completely say, only partially. Grandpa, rest him, was a Navy officer of transport charge. Grandma, well she was the most patriotic of nurses. So maybe it's the notion that to some folks wars never end? Midway, Pearl Harbor, Hiroshima. Grandpa Fred Liederbach—a hopeful engineer, and painter, and clarinetist (more than a tad defensive, I assume, about his Germanic handle)—was Atlantic Ocean-stationed, down in Florida, but rumored to be streaming for the Pacific, for certain carnage, when news came across the scratchy radios that the Japanese had surrendered. Cheering, the sailors were. Or I imagine they were. Cheering and yelping and fist-pumping and tap-dancing on deck.

Oh, I can see it! I can! And I can still hear its echo, those hordes of young men swarming port, casting their caps high in the wind, grabbing the nearest nurse for a deep-dip kiss. A kiss that's then perfectly photographed. A kiss that winds up in *Life* magazine's August '45 *Victory* spread. A kiss so iconic it's blown-up two-by-three feet and framed, and slapped under plastic, and tossed on the walls of half the sororities house in America, where, on the sofa below, surrogate sisters, vaginas sheered and glitter-sprinkled and properly IUD-stuffed, gather in a huge living room to palm Jell-O shots and chant,

*I'm a little Kappa, I put out
here is my hand and here is my mouth
When I get all turned on, hear me shout
flip me over and eat me out!*

No, they do sing this. They do.

And, yes, this *is* happening. This very song, this very last fall. Though I will say that Grandma is not the one crooning it. One of my college students, she's the crooner. The girl just starts singing away in my fiction class, and in her wake swells a moment of

leaded silence.

Heater-boards clack.

Classmates snifle.

Then, after the pause, a surge of response. Seems the lyrics have split our classroom down the middle. Seems you're either laughing hysterically or pinching your face in doleful consternation. Or everyone but me and said sorority sister. I go poker face, and she, well she simply shrugs. Sits back, checks her nail polish, her visage Mona-Lisa-ed and totally undisturbed by the hisses and cheers.

To her, it's all a calm, private joke. The joke is a joke I get, sure, but it is also one I never will. It's about absorbing that deliciously untextualized energy and saying to oneself, *Hey, instead of subjugation, instead of whipping this baby I've birthed into submission, or chopping it in half, King Solomon style, I'll let it suspend me, happy between two worlds, beautifully diluted into the core of this freed thing until I'm back in my sorority house, back on the sofa, back singing with my sisters our private songs that may smell of vodka and raspberry and may throb like Lady Gaga through our knee-high boots and clit-piercings and hoop-earrings, but there's even more in the mix—hope, virility, amity, reason to keep plugging forward despite our gravity, our decomposing brains, our inevitable corpse-hood, and so Judge not Lest Ye be Judged, and so Take the Log from Your own Eye Before Attempting to Remove the Mote from Your Sister's.*

Or something like that, like, I hope, this rant you're reading.

“What's this for?”

The first thing Ryan says, looking at the bourbon bottle, eyeing it like it's some

antique, tincture curiosity.

“What’s this for?”

I swear on Grampa’s grave Ryan says this, and my brain’s like, *Freakin A*, right? I mean, like what can I do? What am I supposed to do with such Good-Neighborly-ness? After twenty-plus months I realize: nothing. I’ve chalked it up to Ryan’s jack-Mormonism. For that’s Ryan’s lot in this city, at least according to Ryan. He’s the worst sort of gentile—not “he of little faith,” but “he of no faith anymore.”

Then again, Ryan won’t dub himself a Jack, claims he’s a Cultural Mormon. To this I curl my hand and maturely mime another sort of jack, muttering, “Six in one hand, six in one hand,” because Jack Mormon’s a concept that’s cake for me to swallow. Growing up, we had the Pentecostal designate “Backslider,” and though I’m undoubtedly backslidden, I must admit that in no way are Ryan and I the same breed. Roughly the same-age we are, and both at the university, but he’s got some cool, unfastened, and empirical gaze on his indoctrinated youth, while me, I’m still seething.

Maybe by studying history, specifically Latter-Day history, Ryan’s managed to wrap his past, his religion, all its fictions and contradictions, violences and passions, into this crazy-chill taxonomy? Because the guy, he loves it all. Really. His Mormonism, jack or not, is kept close to his body like a boxer never threatened.

Sipping whiskey in my kitchen. Two a.m. Maybe I will eat the hash cookies Ryan’s brought over?

I will. Two a.m., and the guy tells me he approaches Mormonism—family, friends, all ultradevout—on his own terms. It’s with his own mutated language, and so what the fuck? Hey, they can take him or leave him for all he cares.

It's probably my THC buzz and insomnia combo, but Ryan's statement floors me to complete silence. Very tricky to do, because at the mention of Evangelicals my mind, muscles, and glands go ballistic. Almost cinematic, it is. My fury after all these years, it's like *Pulp Fiction*—and not simply an overdosed Mia Wallace getting an adrenaline syringe punch to the breastplate, but a full-on Sam Jackson, barking white saliva scripture while a Browning M1911 guilt pistol trains on my eternally unwashed soul—

As you can see, I have not lost the Midwestern pulpit drama.

But I don't own a semi-automatic handgun, that's for sure. Though, truthfully, I cannot count the times I've wanted to—Palin, Prop 8, Rush Limbaugh, *Jersey Shore*, Tom Wolfe—not to aim at a body, but just to scream my frustration whilst discharging it into the empty heavens.

Though should I consider buying a gun, exercising my national right to bear more arms than these two, Michelle dishes a Lacanian reverse: “Baby, you’ve got the only gun you need; anything else would be like massive tires on our little pickup.”

Maybe she doesn't say this, but in my head she croons it, lips pursed. And I calm. Or calm until the March tsunami in Fukushima where I read Franklin Graham blathering, “What are the signs of Christ's second coming?”

—(he generously answers before anyone else can)—

“War and famine and earthquakes ... escalating like labor pains. ... Maybe this is it, I don't know. We should pray and be vigilant. The Bible teaches us Jesus is going to return someday. Many of us we believe that day is sooner rather than later.”

Wars, famines, natural disasters, Red Seas splitting, Roman Empires falling, Dark

Ages lightening, Mormons massacred in the Midwest, and then, barely a century later, whole communities of Japanese-American's "interned" in "camps," rounded up like lambs per FDR's Executive Order 9066. On top of this, it takes twenty-two years for Congress to pass apology legislation—

Apology legislation!

Ah, but it's easy to see why, right? History keeps marching, and how to keep up with its tides of atrocity? How easily conflicts overlap, slip from the mind, or too deep in memory after so many years... Katrina who? Wait, did she sit in the first or second row?

And worse, it's how my mom calls when she hears the tsunami news, how the woman's trying so hard to affect a tone of concern, trying so hard to her stifle her enthusiasm and, frankly, it's terrifying. She tells me she's praying for the Japanese. She says she's begging the Lord to give them courage and strength. She says she's read in a newspaper that the Japanese are finally returning to religion in the wake of the disaster.

"Did you know that, Nathan? I read they used to believe in Hell? Is that true? Can I ask Michelle?"

Michelle takes the phone, and Mom says, "Really? Hell? I mean, wow. Japan, I didn't think—it's just interesting ... I mean, good for them ... now..."

Oops, too late. Long before my wife even sets her jaw to diplomatically respond, Glenn Beck already has. Yes, the "constitutional stalwart" so carefully summed it: "I'm not saying God is causing earthquakes—well, I'm not *not* saying that either! What God does is God's business ... But I'll tell you this ... there's a message being sent. And that is, 'Hey, you know that stuff we're doing? Not really working out real well. Maybe we should stop doing some of it.' I'm just saying."

The rental car eases to a stop in front of our house. “Mom!” Dad shouts at Grandma from my front lawn. “Hey, Mom, over here. What’re you doing? *This* house. Your grandkids live in this one.”

I step onto the porch, saying, “Hi, Grandma,” and Dad motions at me like he’s Vanna White. “Here’s your grandson, Mom! Here’s Nathan!”

“Don’t you tell me, Tommy,” Grandma snaps. Then to me: “Nathan! You’re all grown up! In college! Mormon college! You gonna meet a wife and make your love through a hole in a sheet!”

I tell her not really. Tell her that it’s my PhD, and not at BYU, but she interrupts me with the classic cheek-pinch and I can’t help but think of Grandpa. How he didn’t come to Salt Lake—you know, being how he’s mortally disabled eight years and counting. Though, luckily and conversely, the man never had his wife’s dementia worries, either. No, Grandpa’s problems were all blood-plumbing. In 2002, separated from Grandma and living in a retirement community, he had a stroke. He was maybe eighty-two at the time, and it was two full days stranded on his bedroom floor. Unable to move, to call for help, so by the time he’s found, well, the damage is too complete.

Next, Dad flies out to be bedside. To be there when his father passed. But it’s not for months and months after the funeral that my old man can gather himself and give me a report. He says his father was sickened with embarrassment, shitting himself, pissing all over. He tells me how Grandpa was barely able to make eye-contact. How the old man’s face read of nothing but self-distain and the wildest fear, the yawning question of what death held.

Grandpa was a Catholic, but how much? Did he embrace the Nicene Creed?

Believe he could be absolved? As Dad tells me all this, tells me about his own father's not looking at him, Dad himself won't look at me. This leaves me thinking, Self-disdain? Wild fear?—okey-dokey, makes a little sense, but, really, how to separate the two?

To disdain the self is to step away from it, to view it apart, and so yes, "wild fear," but then looms the question of how to return to oneself now that one's separated, now that one's sliding ever backward, divorced from one's own history but simultaneously blind to any truth of what the future holds?

So one doesn't return to oneself, but to one's wife. Michelle is far outside the jack/backslider algorithm. She's the first to admit it, too. Raised categorically irreligious (not counting her father's rabid obsession with all things Joss Whedon), Michelle, even after five years with me, is still staggered by my youthful indoctrinations. Conversely, I'm staggered by her agnostic ones. Not just jealous, but truly staggered.

Right now, Michelle's on the phone with her mother. They're discussing the tsunami. They're speaking in Japanese. As coincidence would have it, Yoshiko was visiting her childhood home when the quake struck, but, fortunately, my mother-in-law was all the way south, in Kagoshima, a long-haul from the disasters in the Miyagi prefecture. This is what my wife and her mom are talking about, but I don't know it, not yet. Soon I will. Soon I'll ask Michelle for a translation of their conversation, but until then all I want is to revel in the sound of her luscious, Japanese lilt. How it washes over me, keeps me from her, the way she's someone I can never quite know—*chotto, chotto, anoooooooo, sou deshou? Sou janai!*

Michelle hangs up. We take the dogs on a trail that Ryan told us about. A huff

into the Salt Lake foothills. We're winding bare scrub oak and withered sage. Black clouds amass above us and in a gust our visibility's cut. But it's not snow and it's not rain. They're pea-sized balls plunking silently.

"Not hail," Michelle says, palm out. "Too soft to be hail ... sleet?"

"No, sleet's freezing rain."

My wife marches on, conceding, "Guess there's no word for it—what the hail."

"Ah Hail," I say. "Ah Hail! All Hail!" and just like I'm trigger-worded into song:

"All hail, King Jesus. All hail, Emmanuel! Prince of Peace, Lord of Lords, Bright Morning Star..."

This tune I haven't heard in twenty years. Purposefully avoiding it, all the tension it holds, but yet every lyric's intact. Further, but doesn't it feels grand! Now I'm roaring it out as we hike—such richness and sincerity, a wormhole leap into the roots of myself, into the vast Sanctuary of Full Faith Church of Love and its crisp A/C sealing off the Kansas City humidity. Sealing off that languishing, gravy-sky weight of the Secular world, and here, on my left, here's Dad. He's towering above me, feral-red hair and arms stretched to God. Dad, but younger than I am now, and I can hear his guts crying out like so: *Pick me up, Lord! Rapture me, please! Carry me away from these damn suburbs, this Midwestern stew, these complaisant, arm-chair Christians...*

Then, on my right, here's Mom. She not the shell of despair she is today—zombied on clozapine, a woman whose family's abandoned the faith, leaving her in paranoid darkness, refusing to join her in Heaven, twisting her paradise into a lonely hell, just her and that trickster god perched on hard gold park benches surrounded by fluffy lambs and herbivorous lions—no, not that woman. Here in the Full Faith Sanctuary

Mom's still vastly stunning, that rich-Croat skin perfectly olive, black-silk hair tumbling her shoulders. The most gorgeous woman in church and more gorgeous by her lusty Godliness. Tears streaming as the Spirit slips hot inside her. As the Holy Ghost lifts her chin, forces open her mouth, breasts heaving, tongue unleashing the juice of thrumming angels,

*King of Kings,
Lord of Lords,
Bright Morning Star,
And throughout eternity,
You're going to haunt me
and forever more, I will
will, will, will, will, will, will, will*

I am suddenly wondering if during her visit Grandma met Ryan? I don't remember. But Grandma meets Grandpa. Oh yes. That's a must for me to be here. And when she meets him, well it should be after V-J Day, right? Fredrick Liederbach, he's an officer now, back from the war, back in Chicago at an Officer's Club where the Navy is busing-in beautiful nurses by the dozen. A live big-band gets the gals singing, dancing, spinning like teacups upside-down and all around until the sailor and the nurse are kissing again. Kissing like they're supposed to, like the photo teaches.

But have you ever set aside your Jell-O shot and told your sorority sisters to turn down the Gaga so you can really examine that V-J photo? *Is* it romantic? *Is* the story so simple? Blink closely at the picture and tell me the nurse is enjoying it. Tell me there's not something murderous about the way the sailor's got her half-headlocked, scratching at her waste (ovary-high), the way she's nothing but a receptacle for his victory.

Hm. What's that other bumper sticker? "Nice truck, sorry about your penis."

Overcompensation—an old story, sure, but does that mean it's finished? Is the

enthymeme so exact or was something forgotten? Nice song, sorry about your scriptures.
Nice boat, sorry about your life.

Nice boat, sorry about your life! Fredrick L. did not know this fellow, this Rogers Blood guy, but they were born the same year. Though where Grandpa and the crew of the USS Rogers Blood ultimately enjoyed peace, their vessel's namesake, only a year and some change earlier, had not. First Lieutenant Blood, a New Hampshire boy, an All-American youth, a skier, scholar, orator, and editor, was cut-down in February of 1944 by Japanese fire during an invasion of Eniwetok Atoll—262 Americans dead, 2,677 Japanese.

Blood was a member of the 22nd Marine Regiment, was born in 1922, and had just turned 22 when he died. And how about this: he and I share a birthday, January 29. We're Aquarius, the cup-bearer—in Greek mythology, Zeus' pet servant boy, Ganymede. The diluted yarn: so sizzlingly sexy was this Trojan prince that when Zeus spied the boy he transformed himself into a giant eagle and carried Ganymede off to Olympus, wherein he granted his precious catamite immortality.

Now, how this metaphor maps onto Lieutenant Blood and the Great Seal of the United States (Spread Eagle? Rigid Arrows? Unseeded Olives?), I'll leave be, but I'm not *not* saying that there are scraps of truth to Freud's notion that a man's life is nothing more than the anxiety of war—war being pending castration. Or to Freud's sibling concept that a woman's life is informed wholly by being born into that lack, the war having happened, her existence the consequence of some prebirth chopping-block—no handle, no spout, already turned over, already poured out.

I'm a Little Teapot. The tune you know so well, it first came to fame in 1939. But

it wasn't *just* a song—that was secondary. A guy named Sanders wrote it because the kids in his dance studio couldn't nail a waltz. *Hey*, he thought, *I'll scrip a pantomime—if they sing, they won't overthink their actions*. This was six years before Eisenstaedt snapped his famous V-J photo, and, of course, the image debuted in *Life* long before my student's marvelous cunnaliguistics, but the real question is this: how to escape your own pendulum without looking into the pit?

How—long after all the confetti has fallen and the champagne bottles have rolled into the dark corners of every restaurant booth—do humans, lips wretchedly chapped, manage to ask: What of the incredible bloodshed? Victory or not, how to shift the war-mind to the peace-mind? The sailor uniform to husband uniform to daddy uniform? The nurse uniform to wife uniform to widow uniform? To some, ending a war means losing a certainty of who you are—not only what you fought for or against, but how you felt fighting. But to others, like me, there has never been a war, only its rumor. We're living in *The Last Days*—it's what I sang as a boy, sang with my bones more than my mouth. Bones and skin, goose bumps sprouting my indignation, reminding me I was anything but my songs' sorry subjects:

*The Children died, the days grew cold,
a piece of bread could buy a bag of Gold;
I wish we'd all been ready.
There's no time to change your mind,
The Son has come and you've been left behind.*

That's Larry Norman's lyrical sputum, the grandfather of Christian rock. His most famous song longed for the Second Coming, for meeting his maker, but his actions belied them. In '92, to warrant a rickety blood-pumper, the man took on a defibrillator implant. This kept him out of Heaven until 2008. And then, the day before his homecoming, his website read: "I feel like a prize in a box of Cracker Jacks with God's hand reaching down to pick me up."

Then there's another man who *wants* to stay in the box, who doesn't want to be a prize, a virgin bride for the Lion of Judah. This man, on the edge of his bed, tells himself that he doesn't believe, that he can refuse to believe, but even still, some Utah nights, he finds himself wondering, *Holy Shit, maybe I should put that Jesus uniform on now, just so I don't get punked?*

Rapture-raped. Cursed to the trials and tribulations of the Antichrist's seven-year reign. *Do you love Jesus, Punk?*—slicing your scrotum with a rusty spade. *Do you love Jesus, Punk?*—the demon soldier's got a handgun/state emblem and he's growling, *Do you love Jesus, Punk?*—666 carved into the gentle skin of the believer's belly so he's spitting waves of blood, layers of fat opened, quiet little earthquakes.

A month ago, my Gender Studies professor had us read a pamphlet designed for male prisoners, "Hooking Up: Protective Pairing for Punks." It preached that if you're heading to prison and want to avoid violent gang rape (with a side of Hep C, paralysis, death) immediately and voluntarily become a "junior partner" to a "senior partner." In exchange for his use of your physical body, you get the senior partner's ultimate protection and the reassurance that no foul hoards might accost you in the shower. This, I believe, falls under Jesus' advice to turn the other cheek. Or spread both. Humiliate yourself. Lose yourself to the mostly-monotheistic influence of the Holy Spirit, offering one's body (and brain) as sacrifice and, in so doing, gaining one's self.

In his letter to the Romans, Apostle Paul asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" Matthew, in his gospel, writes: "Then said Jesus unto his disciples, 'If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For

whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it.” Compare these quotes, if you will, to Stephen Donaldson’s “Hooking Up: Protective Pairing for Punks”:

...It is true that if you become a punk and are locked up for a long time, you will get somewhat used to the punk role. This varies a lot from one punk to another. Some still hate every sex act after a decade of doing it every day. Others focus on the other aspects of the relationship and find some value there. Some treasure the security it brings. Many punks who have good relationships actually become fond of their jockers. It is not so uncommon, in the unusual conditions of confinement, for two straight guys to fall in love with each other over time. Psychologists generally consider adaptation to be a healthy reaction to a situation that you cannot change, so don't worry about it if you find yourself adapting to the role...

In yet another epistle to the Colossians, Paul writes: “In whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ.” The tricky syntax here enhances the rationale: “circumcision of Christ.” Be it Jesus wielding the knife on you, or on himself, or both at once, castration *is* salvation. To surrender is not only an end to war, but a beginning to free life.

Fine but, unlike Paul, forced vs. volitional adaptation is not something I’m concerned with. I’m concerned with how war quivers in my periphery like egg yolks of unformed ideals. How, even though I jettisoned Evangelicalism years ago, this new state I’m in, with its own Utah God, with its own supplementary texts and these ragged-toothed mountains hemming such Canaan beauty—a beauty often smothered in low-ceilings of pollution, miserable inversion days leaving me struggling for oxygen, for thought—reminds me of my human fragility and inevitable decomposition, of the very

real possibility that my own mind will one day sputter, wobble, and be unable for flight, and that if Jesus doesn't leave me behind, Alzheimer's, genetically, and undoubtedly, will...

I'm not saying Jesus *will* leave me behind. But I'm not *not* saying that either.

And I'm not saying I'm happy about Grandma's Alzheimer's, but I am saying it seems she is.

Dear Grandma, in spite of my red-alert over your life-long racial-religio gripes, infiltrated with this disease you're blissfully content with the sum of all things Salt Lake. Further, you adore my crackerjap wife. With every chance, you're gushing Michelle's radiance—"How stunning your black, black hair! How well it matches that toss of sweet freckles! Gorgeous, just gorgeous! But I'm sorry, what was your name again?"

Strict benevolence on Grandma's part. Or maybe I'm being too freakin' generous? Maybe it was only confusion stacked and cancelling other confusions. Maybe it was all the light-speed travel, how Dad and Grandma and Michelle and I beamed about the planet like a veritable Enterprise Crew? All through lunch, from one moment to the next, first it's one city, then another. We have appetizers in Portland, tea in Olympia, salads in Victoria. We're eating seafood in downtown Salt Lake, and Dad says, "Mom, how's that fresh salmon? Hey, have you been here in Seattle before?"

Grandma strokes her chin with a trembling paw, says, "Seattle? Wow, I like it! And wouldn't you know, it's not raining!"

We all agree that the weather's quite advantageous, nodding sincerely, returning to our clam chowder. Next, we head up to the University of Utah campus. Flinging his

arms wide, Dad shouts, “Don’t you love Montana, Mom?” and Grandma cries, “Montana! It’s just like the movies! Gabby Hayes! Smilely Burnette! Jean Parker!”

Then, back in the car zipping up to Park City via a quick jaunt through west Texas and Donner’s Pass and, hey, why not, Austria.

“The world,” Grandma breathes, “is so diverse, isn’t it?”

You’re right, Ryan is not Ryan’s real name. I borrowed the name from my high-school friend. The real Ryan was Mormon, and not Jack Mormon, not at all. He was my first Mormon friend, and, frankly, the first guy in my entire high school to intoxicate me with honesty. He’d fallen in love with my girlfriend, he said, and he didn’t think I treated her with proper respect. I blinked at him for a few moments, then I agreed. Next, we went rabbit hunting. We killed a great many bunnies, butchered them, and cooked them up for the girlfriend. After that, Ryan and I were buddies for the rest of our senior year.

Though it’s not like we didn’t know each other beforehand. We had, yes. For our town was so teensy. But we hadn’t spoken since eighth grade, since my first few months in Colorado. That was the year when, after a school rally, after Ryan and I and a girl named Charity were corralled and verbally assaulted by a gaggle of popular pricks who’d sussed us out—Ryan: Total Wimp, Me: Total Fag, Charity: Total Bull-dyke. Well, I wanted a way out, so I totally grabbed Ryan by the arms, totally wrenched his elbows behind his back, and Charity totally pounded the air out of him. Ryan crumbled. Curled on his side by the bleachers. He absorbed all the hyena laughter so Charity and I could slip our shackles, return into anonymity.

Then again, I have the haunting suspicion that this didn’t happen in a public

setting, but I can't remember. And despite how I've chosen to remember it, I'm pretty sure no one was around, just the three of us, and for some reason our oppressors' epithets didn't fall upon us like mantles until we three were alone. Then it was demon possession. The Fag grabbed the Wimp from behind so the Bull-dyke could, as Bull-dykes are required to do, make a mockery of his masculinity.

However, five years later, we reconnect. Or Ryan and I do. I believe the girl, Charity, well she was bullied right out of our little hick town. Yet Ryan, he never mentioned this mutual memory. He loved my girlfriend, I didn't, and that was our complete history. Our future was this: he hoped that, since she loved me and not him, I would either mercifully break up with her or dig into my gut and grant her the affection she so deserved.

An eighteen-year-old! Telling this to another eighteen-year-old this!

I broke it off with her. Told myself that was *my* idea. Anyway, after graduation, Ryan and I never spoke again. This wasn't because, I like to think, my freshman year of college I fully morphed into the arrogant, pseudo-artistic charlatan I'd been attempting to be all through my midteens, but rather because Ryan left the country on his Mormon mission. In Spain, I think it was, and there he died. Supposedly, it was a complete fluke. Seems he was playing a game of soccer, playing keeper, and leaped to grab the crossbar, to do a pull-up, but the bar came free. Perfectly snapped his neck.

Indubitably, as a devout Mormon, Ryan didn't die questioning where he'd go. I've been jealous of this for years. Right now I'm jealous of this. Snap, done. No tidy clean-up, all the work for those left alive—*Go thee in to all the world...*

Or jealous until this past fall when, only a few months ago, my dad's younger

brother offed himself. Happened in my uncle's new home, on his fiftieth birthday. My aunt left for celebratory dinner supplies and returned to find her husband, John, hanging in the foyer, dangling from the bannister of the upstairs landing. My uncle, a devout Evangelical, hadn't spoken to me in ten years. Not since he'd called me up out of the blue, called me after hearing that my first wife and I were divorcing, that I'd cheated on her, to tell me, "Don't let it go through, man."

His voice was tinged with the jocular, which to the men in my family means dead-serious. He said, "Nathan, what God joins together let no man separate, dude."

I said, "Is this a warning?"

He said, "Yes."

I said, "Wow, you didn't once call me during my six years of marriage to ask how it was going, all the times I didn't know who to turn to, all those time I could have used pragmatic, big-brotherly advice, and now you feed me this holy trite bullshit with no bearing on the real world?"

He said, "You're right."

I said, "I know."

He began to say, I think, "But I'm calling now—" and I hung up. Never phoned or visited him after that, didn't even know the names of two of his four kids until I introduced myself beside his casket. Didn't know what job my uncle had, what he thought about turning forty, forty-five, fifty.

"John was fighting a war with himself and losing," his sister, my aunt, a nonreligious New Yorker, told mourners. She stood on the dais of that massive and garish sanctuary in the midst of southern Nashville's millionaire mansions and equestrian

meadows, and said, “Losing more every day, but he didn’t know how to ask for help.”

Yes, my sickened brain crowed, yes! Wasn’t that the point of a personal Lord and Savior? That you always had God and His Son, something external, something superhuman, to turn to? That, according to Hebrews, God promised, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you”?

Though there’s another part to that verse. What comes before—if syntax is chronology and if chronology is context: “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God said, ‘Never will I etc. etc. etc.’”

Then my other uncle, Associate Professor of Christian Ethics at a Southern Baptist seminary, and the sibling closest to John, took the microphone. This other uncle, through chokes and rough tears, announced that his brother *couldn’t* ask for help. That, obviously, John couldn’t see any way out. That he had a disease. That this wasn’t about where his heart was, but about where his *mind* was. Uncle Mark said that John’s heart had never wavered, that it had stayed the course, had run the Good Race and finished. Said it was John’s logic that went astray. That John just couldn’t rationalize through the fog of his depression, but that he was at peace now, safe in Heaven, calm, knowing exactly where he was.

“And this,” Mark roared, “this is why we, even in dark moments, rest assured in our Christian Hope! Christian Hope cannot be crushed or destroyed, Christian Hope is—”

“Boy,” Grandma, in the front row, interrupted, leaning over to a family member beside her. “Boy, this guy, he’s really long-winded, isn’t he?”

“Shhhh, Grandma.”

“Don’t shhhh me. What is all this? Come on, what’s the big to-do? Who died?”

Sundown settling on our little end of the world, washing its pink glow over these Matterhorns as we stroll Park City's quaint, Swiss streets. Stroll until our stomachs growl, and I've got Grandma by the withered arm-crook. She cocks her head at me and says, "Hey, I heard that!"

"I hope you did. Because it was *your* dusty fart, lady."

"It was me," Michelle says, "just taste the wasabi."

We milk a solid chuckle out of that one. Or we do until my stomach growls again. Then Grandma says, "OK, enough. Hey, what sort of grub can one get in Switzerland?"

Punked! But who, all of us? And why now? Could it be that the Alzheimer's merely gave her a chance to not take things personally? Her husband was almost a decade dead. With him, not only his alcoholism, but their time in Los Alamos after the war, all that sublime destruction that Fred's brilliant, young, engineering mind had helped develop. But worse, how the man had torn Grandma away from that perfect little town she loved so dearly. How he'd moved her again and again, their Catholic family growing larger and larger, but the two of them never half as happy as they'd been for those few short years in northern New Mexico—

"Switzerland?" Dad interrupts. "No, Mom, what are you crazy? We're home, your *real* home! Ireland!" and we slip into a cozy pub, complete with a stone fireplace and three-piece jig-band. Next, we're ordering Guinness after Guinness, frothing our lips, clinking our glasses.

"It's absolutely wonderful to be back!" Grandma coos, her watery gaze gleaming. Looking around, she grins and grins, says, "And to have all this family with me! And to come this far in such a short, short time. The things we've seen! Remember Salt Lake

City? Can you believe those wacky Mormons! What was her name? And that blue-eyed husband of hers?"